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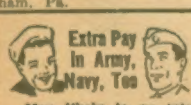

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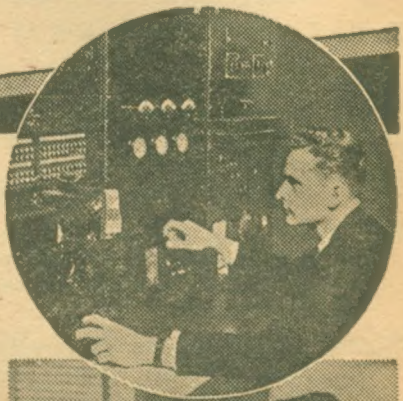

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# Adventure

(Registered U. S. Patent Office)

Vol. 108, No. 1 for November, 1942 Best of New Stories

**Prayer for Airmen (verse)** . . . . . EMMA NORWOOD LAWRENCE 11
*Be with the valiant hearts who fly to make Thy peoples free!*

**To the Last Man (1st part of 3)** . . . . . WILLIAM E. BARRETT 12
It was inevitable that Craig Archer, nurtured in the cradle of North American liberty, should be drawn to the South American continent to aid the patriots there in their parallel bid for freedom. But he'd no sooner landed on that legendary shore than the first lesson any mercenary must learn was drilled into him with the point of a sword—that only the fool calls upon the tiger to defend him from a dog.

**Native Son** . . . . . ROY YONGE 31
The Japanese officer had never seen a man quite like Henry before, and when the smoke cleared away he hoped fervently he'd never see another.

**Mission to Mauritania (a novelette)** . . . . . GEORGES SURDEZ 34
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**Laughing Bones** . . . . . PAUL ANNIXTER 96
It was the strangest field order ever to be issued in wartime—*Any man found guilty of shooting a hyena will forfeit a month's pay and spend a week in the guardhouse.*

**Letter of the Law** . . . . . DAVID LAVENDER 104
Norcross was new as sheriff, and he meant to do the job right—the hard way. But there was no harm in using a little imagination in the doing.

**Yumpin' Yimminy—A Yap!** . . . . . FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE 106
"Aye musta swallered my snoose," Sven Nordstrom muttered. "But bay Yimminy Aye got me a Yap!"

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**Ask Adventure** . . . . . Information you can't get elsewhere 6
**The Trail Ahead** . . . . . News of next month's issue 124
**Lost Trails** . . . . . Where old paths cross 122

***Cover painted for Adventure by Charles De Feo***
***Kenneth S. White, Editor***

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# ASK ADVENTURE

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THE Tibetans take their religion seriously.

Request:—At various places and times I have heard that there are Europeans and Americans in some of these monasteries in Tibet; while never reading it or hearing definitely, nevertheless I've heard it mentioned in discussions, and being interested in that country I would like your answer on the subject. Also, is Tibet as hard to enter as some magazines have featured it, for example, could an ordinary person, not a diplomat or an ambassador, enter?

If you are aware of any good books or magazines published about Tibet could you please inform me as to where I may obtain them and their titles?

—Sto. 1/c O.N. 21804
H.M.C.S. St. Laurent
c/o F.M.O. Halifax
Nova Scotia.

Reply by Seward S. Cramer.—There have been, from time to time, quite a number of Europeans and Americans studying and living in the various Tibetan monasteries and abbeys. It isn't common but it isn't so rare that it causes any excitement. Remember this, the Tibetans take their religion very seriously. They believe it to be a very satisfactory religion and have not taken kindly to many attempts to divert them to other channels. So they look with suspicion on anybody that comes to them talking of religion. However, once they know that you are serious in your study of lamaism, they are very hospitable and will go to many ends to help you.

Tibet is hard to enter because it is way off the beaten path and it requires a bit of work to make the actual trip itself. The Tibetans are not anxious to make their country a tourists' playground and therefore they keep out everybody that has no real business in the country. But if you really want to get there you can. The British Mission to Tibet could be helpful and many of the Nepalese business men could also help. But it is still a land of mystery and many writers have tried to enhance their own daring by exaggerating a wee bit on the difficulties that they ran into. But if you want to get there, you can.

Gene Lamb and Harrison Forman have both written quite a bit on the easy side of Tibet. Younghusband wrote a learned book on the early British campaigns into Tibet. Suydam Cutting has written a couple of books that should be interesting to you. If you can only get one book, I would probably recommend Theos Bernard's "Penthouse of the Gods"—he is one that went there to study.

Maybe we'll meet there after the war! Good luck!

WEAPONS of the early Western frontier.

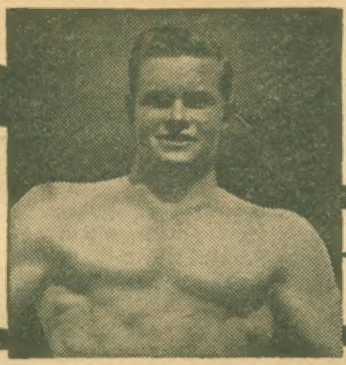
Request:—When was the first cylinder "short-arm" introduced into the West, approximately? When was the first double-action revolver used in the West? When was the first ready-made ammunition for revolvers sold in the West? Was this ammunition readily available? What was the popular, freely sold, or most easily obtained, calibers of revolvers? Did the cylinder turn upon discharge of the cartridge, in the early models of the revolvers? What were the effective ranges?

When was the first repeating rifle introduced into the West? What was its action—bolt, lever, or pump? When were each of these types introduced? Was jamming common? What kind of caliber was popular? Was ammunition readily available? What was the effective shooting range, judging from the standard of accuracy? Were they so expensive, in the early stages of their appearance on the market, to be beyond the reach of the ordinary range-man?

Am I correct in assuming that the

*(Continued on page 8)*

# HE Mailed This Coupon



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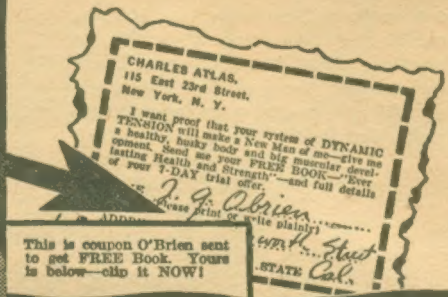
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Name .....
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*(Continued from page 6)*

"Smith & Wesson—American—.44 cal." was not a self-cocker, and had to be "fanned"?

Is it true that there were few if any, who could fan two guns at once, by thumb action. That, in reality, one hand was used to grip the gun and the other was brought across and over in order to "fan" with the inside heel of the palm?

Richard G. Lawrence
Box No. 21-666
Represa, Calif.

Reply by Donegan Wiggins:—I'll answer to the best of my ability, although of course I was not on the really old frontier, being born in 1888.

First, I feel sure that the Colt revolver reached the Texas Frontier Battalion (we call them the Rangers, you know), about 1838, being secured by Captain Jack Hayes in New York, for that express purpose. The revolver was a single action, and had to be cocked deliberately for each shot, and had a trigger that folded into the lower forward part of the lock frame when not in use. The famous Paterson Colt, in fact, so called from being made at Paterson, New Jersey.

I believe the double action revolver as a serviceable arm, the Colt Lightning Model, got there about 1880, although I have seen the remains of a Savage self-cocker that was found in Eastern Oregon on the Oregon Trail, a relic of the Civil War days, and a very cumbersome and unreliable arm. I believe some English self-cocking cap-and-ball revolvers, like the Adams, were used in the gold rush days in Nevada in the sixties, however.

I am under the impression that the first metallic cartridges for use in revolvers used in the old West were the ones for the .44 cap-and-ball revolvers, altered to use the .44 rimfire Henry rifle cartridges, in the mid-sixties or thereabouts. Dates are not very exact on this, I may add. I fancy most traders kept this ammunition on hand, naturally.

The most popular calibers of early revolvers on the Frontier were the Colts in .36 and .44 calibers, and the Remingtons in .44 caliber, cap-and-ball of course. The first strictly cartridge arm seems to have been the little .22 Smith & Wesson of 1858, an arm merely carried as a vest pocket arm, but the first really worthwhile cartridge revolvers would appear to be the .44 S & W American of 1869, followed by the famous Colt .45 Single Action in 1871. I fancy their effective ranges were about a hundred yards.

I believe the first repeating rifle to have been the Paterson Colt revolving rifle, which seems to have hit Texas about the same time as the revolver, say around 1838. It was of course a cap-and-ball arm, with revolving cylinder, operated by cocking the hammer, thus revolving the cylinder, for each shot.

The first lever action was the Henry, invented in 1860, and the Spencer of about the same date, or possibly 1861. These were magazine lever action arms, using rimfire ammunition of .44 in the Henry, and .56 in the Spencer, the Henry being the better arm.

The first pump action was the old Colt, of about 1883, states Saterlee. Some Ward Burton single shot bolt action .50-70 must have been used, as I know of one that was used in the Willow Springs battle in the Bannock War in Eastern Oregon in 1878. I know of no others in the old days. Jamming was frequent in all save the Winchesters I understand.

I think the .44 Winchester the most popular repeater on the old Frontier. Over a million of the 1873 Model in various calibers, .32-20, .38-40, and .44-40 were made. All black powder cartridges with lead bullets, of course, and few used below .44 caliber. I judge the effective ranges about 300 yards for these repeaters, and 500 or more for the .45-75 Winchesters, and the later .45-90, etc.

I think they cost much less than repeaters do today, as I recall the .44 Winchester Model 1873 rifle being retailed at $11.81 for the carbine, and $12.15 for the round barrel rifle, while the more popular octagon barreled rifle brought $13.15. The Frontier Colt .45 revolvers sold at about $15.50, in 1904, I recall.

No, one could not "fan" the Smith & Wesson single action revolvers, due to the way in which the trigger and cylinder stop engaged; the trigger had to move forward freely each time the hammer was drawn back, or the action would lock. I never saw a Smith & Wesson one could "fan," merely the Colt single actions and the Remington single actions having this feature.

One could strip the hammers of two guns at once with the thumbs of the gun hands, and fire very fast, but "fanning" was strictly a two-handed stunt. I question its real value, anyhow, although it was very fast, in the hands of a skilled man, and with a good weapon in excellent condition. Yes, the hammer was slapped back by the palm of the hand not holding the revolver.

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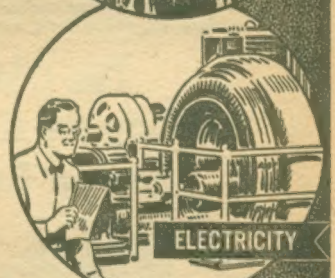


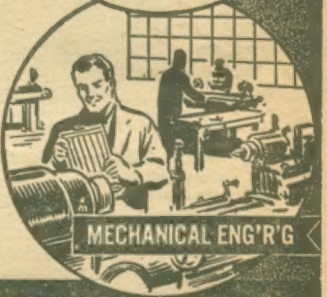


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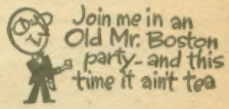


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*If you want to be sure of the very best liquors on your tongue, shop with those three words "Old Mr. Boston" on your tongue.*

# PRAYER FOR AIRMEN

By EMMA NORWOOD LAWRENCE

*Lord God, Whose whisper creates worlds—*
*Earth and seas and sunlit sky—*
*Stretch forth Thy hand, make safe the way,*
*Be with the gallant souls who fly.*

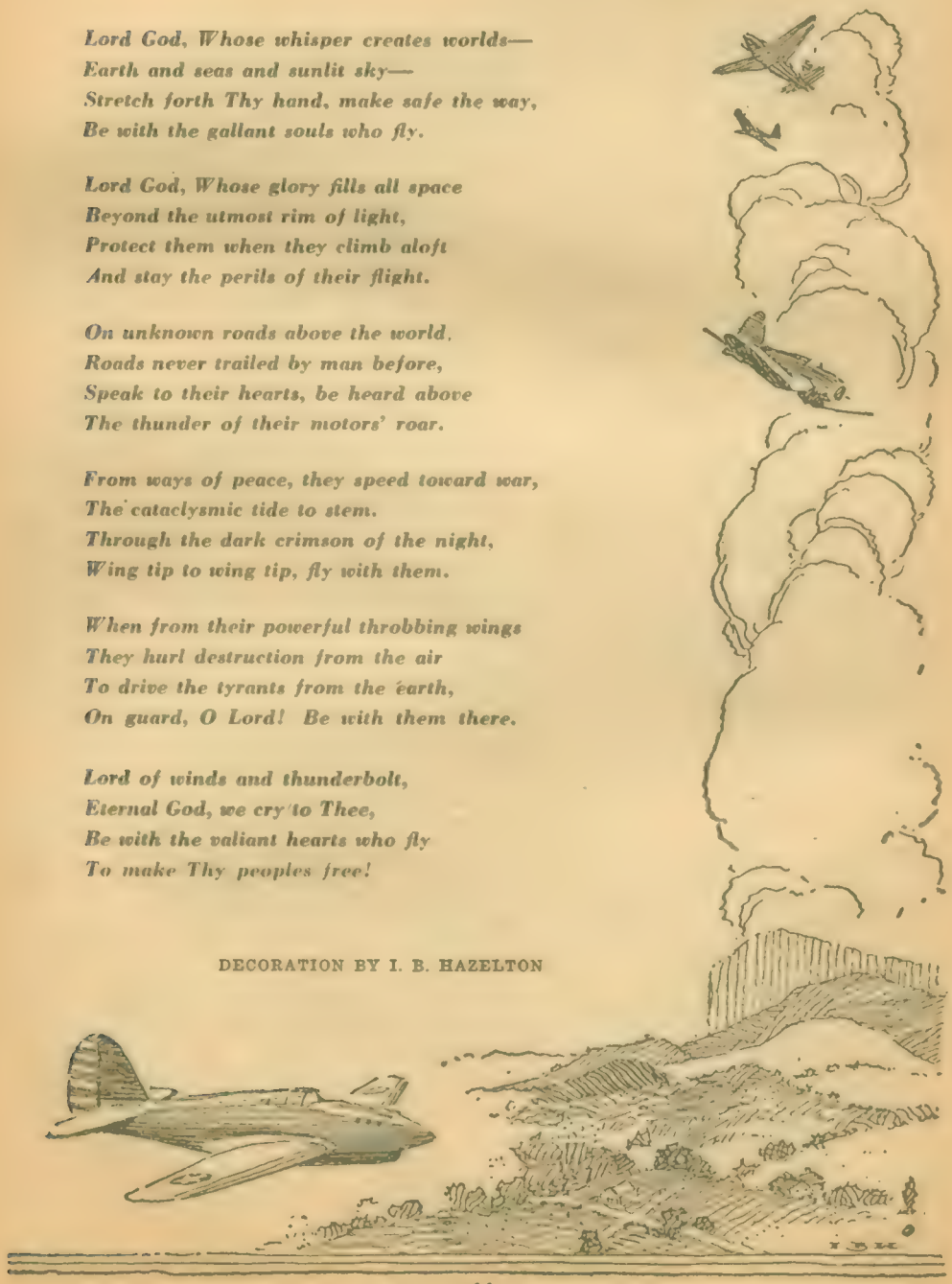
*Lord God, Whose glory fills all space*
*Beyond the utmost rim of light,*
*Protect them when they climb aloft*
*And stay the perils of their flight.*

*On unknown roads above the world,*
*Roads never trailed by man before,*
*Speak to their hearts, be heard above*
*The thunder of their motors' roar.*

*From ways of peace, they speed toward war,*
*The cataclysmic tide to stem.*
*Through the dark crimson of the night,*
*Wing tip to wing tip, fly with them.*

*When from their powerful throbbing wings*
*They hurl destruction from the air*
*To drive the tyrants from the earth,*
*On guard, O Lord! Be with them there.*

*Lord of winds and thunderbolt,*
*Eternal God, we cry to Thee,*
*Be with the valiant hearts who fly*
*To make Thy peoples free!*



DECORATION BY I. B. HAZELTON

# TO THE

ILLUSTRATED BY
HAMILTON GREENE

◇ ◇ ◇

Note: For historical foreword see *Camp-Fire*, page 114.

# LAST MAN

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

*Archer felt his spirits lift as the rowboat bore him and Carrera closer to the shore of a land that was, to him, pure legend.*

IT TOOK forty-eight days, with a better than average favoring of the winds, for the journey from the Port of Baltimore to Maldonado at the mouth of the River Plate. It took forty-eight hours from the mouth of the river to the anchorage off Buenos Aires. Long though the forty-eight days had been for active men held to inactivity, the forty-eight hours seemed longer.

The heat of the last day was all but unbearable and its full fury

seemed to be concentrated in the final hour before sunset. In his private quarters Craig Archer, one time Captain of Cavalry in the Army of the United States, sat sodden with perspiration and stared across a table at the slender Chilean, Carrera.

"God's blood, man!" he said. "Do you tell me at this late hour that we are not expected, that we must land furtively as thieves and not as soldiers in the cause of liberty?"

Miguel Carrera passed the tip of his tongue over his full lips. He was a tall man in his early thirties, darkly handsome, with the full, dark eyes of a woman, the lean face and high forehead of a conspirator, the hands of a swordsman.

"My friend," he said softly, "it is not so bald as that. Soldiering is conducted upon the sea of politics. It is but discreet if first one inquires the state of the tides before one makes a display of arms."

Archer continued to stare at him. The American was twenty-six or -seven, strongly built, with a square jaw and a thrusting chin. His eyes were blue, unblinking in their regard, his lips a firm line. Even when seated, he was unmistakably the soldier, shoulders squared, booted legs out-thrust. He had discarded his jacket in the hot cabin and his shirt was white broadcloth. He had no mustache or beard, but he affected the sideburns fashionable at the time with gentlemen. His hard fist cracked against the table top.

"Damn politics!" he said. "You did not speak of politics when you contracted with me to recruit for you one hundred and fifty fighting men. You spoke of liberty and revolution. You claimed to be the leader of Chile's patriots, supported in Buenos Aires and eager to expel the Spaniards from your country."

The Chilean's dark eyes retreated behind lazy lids. "And what do you suppose now that I am, señor!"

"A scoundrely adventurer, sir, who would use my men and myself to establish a leadership you do not own."

The eyes of the two men dueled and Carrera's shifted away from the contest uneasily. His shoulder twitched imperceptibly.

"You are overswift and overharsh in your judgments," he said. "A pardonable fault in a good soldier. I take no offense. In Buenos Aires I will see men of influence. I shall treat with them in dignity."

"And use me as the balance of a bargain? Think again, señor! I accepted from you a commission as Colonel in the Army of Chile. If you had no power to confer that commission, I acknowledge in you no authority whatever."

Carrera smiled and his lips curled under his waxed and pointed mustache. "I promise you fighting," he said. "All else is detail."

Craig Archer rose to his feet. "I do not replace broken promises with new ones from the same source, señor. I command one hundred and fifty fighting men."

"Ah, yes!" Miguel Carrera poured himself a full glass of wine from a bottle on the table. "One hundred and fifty fighting men whom you cannot pay, whom you cannot feed. Droll, is it not, señor, that the men whom you command, tie you to my service?"

ARCHER stood with his legs far apart to balance against the rolling of the vessel. He had poor cards in this game and he knew it. Carrera had put his finger upon his weakness. It was a pretty trap. Commissioned to lead, he was under command of the paymaster. Brought here with glittering promises, he must push his horizons forward and accept more promises.

Miguel Carrera watched him lazily, his large eyes wide again, his expression amused.

"My Colonel," he said, "we are friends. I but save you the dirty business of intrigue. Your honor shall remain as bright as your buttons, as clean as your sword."

"And if I thrust that sword through your scheming gizzard?"

Carrera spread his hands wide. "Then you are alone. You are not Cortez, señor, nor Pizarro. This is not a nation of helpless Indians, this Argentine. Patience, perhaps, will reward you; impatience will hang you high. Your choice?"

A cabin boy entered with a taper and lighted the brass-bound lantern. The shadows retreated and smoke took their place. Carrera ordered another bottle of wine. Archer, with the air of a man who has reached a decision, resumed his place across the table.

"My men will not remain on shipboard once we make port," he said. "They have counted the hours."

"That is but human. Without red blood, they would be worthless as fighting men."

"That is the controversy between us."

"No. You misunderstand. They land, but not as soldiers. No arms. No equipment. Singly. In small groups. No display of force. Call it a furlough if you will."

Craig Archer frowned at the table top. He knew how hard it would be to recall men to arms and discipline once they had scattered to the joys of a port city. It had been his plan to take them, under command, to billets, letting the feel of solid ground under their feet be their reward for the first twenty-four hours; after that, arranging leaves. It had been his understanding, then, that his troop was destined to join allies already in camp. He knew now that neither he nor his men had any standing, except the perilous role of foreigners, until Carrera had concluded a bargain with other military leaders. Under the circumstances, Carrera's plan was the only one that could be followed, but he cursed inwardly the deceit that had been practiced upon him.

"If you do not command the exiled army of Chile," he said, "who, then, commands it?"

Carrera's eyes grew hard. "O'Higgins. The blundering fool who lost us the battle of Rancagua and forced us to flee across the Andes."

"You fought in that battle?"

"I commanded. The failure of O'Higgins exposed my flank. While I sought the welfare of my countrymen, O'Higgins sought the welfare of O'Higgins. He is a better politician than a soldier."

"And he is—what?"

"A Chileno born. His father was an Irishman, once the Viceroy of Peru. A lackey of the King of Spain."

Archer's fingers drummed on the table.

*Carrera had the face of a conspirator and the hands of a swordsman.*

Carrera had talked much in Washington, more on the journey, yet this was the first mention of O'Higgins and the division of command. The circumstance clouded the Carrera version, but Archer withheld comment. He would be his own man again with solid earth under him, weapons in his hands; his was not the skill of smoky cabins and sly intrigue. A man who held poor cards must observe patience and play with caution. He fell back upon the role of professional soldier.

"So long as my men are paid and my own commission is framed with gold," he said, "I do not give a damn if you are in command or this half-Irishman, O'Higgins."

"Good. O'Higgins will not pay you." Carrera rose to his feet. "I will go now and speak with the captain," he said. "You will then summon your paymaster. The men will have pesos enough to enjoy a moderate amount of liquor, to please a moderate number of women.

The balance will await them when they take up arms."

Archer nodded curtly. "I approve that."

Carrera slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "It is well. A toast, my Colonel. That we may always approve each other."

Archer lifted his glass, frowned at it and drank. "A pious hope!" he said.

FOR a good five minutes after the Chileno had left, the American sat and stared at his drumming fingers, seeing them no more than he saw the table top. He had not been drawn to Carrera from the first, but he had been drawn to the adventure promised him. For the freedom of Chile! It had rung in his brain like an echo from Valley Forge. By taking ship to South America a man might travel back through a generation and take part in the christening of a new, free nation. His blood had stirred to the thought and there was a bitter frustration already in that blood.

A graduate of the Military Academy at West Point, Craig Archer had been commissioned in the cavalry immediately after the declaration of war with England in 1812. He had drawn a quiet garrison post and had been later wasted at Fort McHenry while the American cause had cried aloud for competent cavalry officers at Bladensburg. For a year he had reveled in a cavalry officer's real joy on a campaign against the Indians along the Missouri frontier, but the feather-brained wife of a colonel had obtained for him, without consulting him, a promotion and a transfer to a braid-and-lace post in Washington. He had lacked the stomach for carriage campaigning and had resigned his commission to serve the cause of Chilean independence. Now he sat in a hot and smoky cabin and cursed the duplicity of Miguel Carrera.

It was one thing to fight for a cause, another thing to fight for pay: a far less worthy thing to fight as the pawn of a politician's craving for power.

The heat and the odor of the cabin were suddenly intolerable. Archer rose, strapped on his sword and went on deck. Where his men could see him, he wore the symbols of authority and admitted no weakness.

His second-in-command was leaning against the rail—a lean, somber, lantern-jawed man named Andrew Blackwell whose commission from Carrera proclaimed him a major. Blackwell, like Archer, was formerly an officer of the United States, a veteran of the ill-fated expedition against Canada. Unlike Archer, he had not resigned his commission. It had been taken from him by a court-martial as a consequence of a duel in which he had grievously wounded a fellow officer. Archer, who knew nothing about the cause of the duel, cared less.

"All journeys end, Blackwell," he said. "And all men die."

The second-in-command did not turn his head. Archer raised his eyebrows. "A gay line of thought! Your air of confidence inspires me."

Blackwell nodded into the gray fog beyond the rail. The black shape of a three-masted man-of-war could be dimly perceived off the port bow, its lights haloed in rainbows, like the moon on a frosty night, its brass cannon glowing.

"Those who possess such warships have no need of mercenaries from North America," he said, "and those who do not possess them present their mercenaries with an unequal fight."

Archer stared out into the fog. There was a soldier's shrewdness in Blackwell's reasoning. Like every veteran campaigner, he had a nose for treachery and it was true that those who were able to make public displays of power were seldom in need of soldiers brought from abroad.

"We are flying the star and tricolor of Free Chile," he said, "and these Argentines are our friends: perhaps our allies, perhaps not, but certainly not enemies."

Blackwell turned to look at him. "Do you trust these people?"

Archer's answer was curt. "The time to doubt was the hour before you embarked, Major," he said.

He turned on his heel and strode away down the deck. Blackwell had never inspired liking in him. There was something calculating in the man. Now Archer was disturbed. Either Blackwell

knew of his own disagreement with Carrera or Blackwell had some grounds of his own for misgivings. With an officer of a different type, Archer might have cleared his own doubts through discussion, but with Blackwell, he had to be the commander and keep his own counsel.

"A fine beginning," he muttered. He was frowning and he reached in his pocket, as he habitually did in moments of doubt, for the lucky piece that he had found one day beside a moldering skeleton on the heights above the Hudson. He had not understood it when he first saw it: looking at it, he did not understand it now, but it fascinated him.

It was a gold medal, oval in shape, an inch by a half inch, and there was a hint of the sacrilegious about it. On the one side, where normally such a medal bore a religious image, the figure of a jester was engraved, a grinning creature who wore the traditional cap and bells. Beneath the figure was an inscription in French—*I have two sides, Power has only one.*

Slowly Archer turned the medal in his hand. On the reverse side there was a shield with the inscription—*Causes survive their champions.* Around the edge, in fine script, another legend ran —*The fool calls upon the tiger to defend him from a dog.*

It was an old medal and the man who owned it, perhaps the man who engraved it, died leaving no name and no story behind him, only the jesting mockery of a gold ornament. Archer looked out into the fog toward the dim lights of the warship fading astern, turned the medal once more in his hand and put it away.

"There is no meaning in it," he said. "It is as mad as Life."

## CHAPTER II

### SWORDS AT SUNRISE

LA PLATA at Buenos Aires was thirty miles wide. The vessels of many nations rode at anchor and their lanterns were twinkling stars in the mist. From some of them came music and from all

of them came the rumble of voices, the stir of activity. These were good sounds to men who had been long at sea, accustomed only to such sounds as they made themselves. Craig Archer felt his spirits lift as the oars cut the water and the rowboat bore him closer to the shore of a land that was, to him, pure legend.

Carrera accompanied him in the small boat. There had been mysterious conferences in the cabin of the ship's captain with port officials, and Archer had an idea that bribes had been passed. He had no curiosity about that. It was enough for him that his men were being permitted to land, six at a time. Men who are recruited for foreign service under a flag that is not their own are hard men, tough adventurers who put a strain upon normal discipline. It would not have been easy to tell them that they must spend a night on a ship at anchor after forty-eight days of slow navigation over a monotonous sea.

Carrera was in good humor. "My colonel," he said, "you will find little to charm you, perhaps, in Buenos Aires, but you will not find it dull."

Archer shrugged. "Wherever a man may be, he does not have to make a journey to be bored."

"You will not be bored. *Por Dios,* no!"

The rowboat was in the shallows now but there were few lights to indicate the existence of a large city. A half dozen men with lanterns waded knee deep into the stream and then Archer saw the ox-carts. The men with the lanterns urged the animals forward with sharp cries and when the carts were more than hub deep in the muddy water, they turned them. The rowboats drifted alongside and the passengers transferred to the carts without wetting their feet.

"An ingenious idea, this!" Archer said.

"Ideas are born of necessity. The necessity now is for a better idea, so this city will have one." Carrera twisted the ends of his mustaches. He had the air of one who owned all of South America and who was putting it on display.

The oxen pulled the carts up a sloping ramp to dry ground and Carrera leaped nimbly down. There were carriages lined up and waiting. He bowed Archer into the nearest of them. "Casa Residencial!" he told the driver.

There was a sharp crack of the whip and the horse leaped forward. The carriage jolted along a straight narrow street, remarkable for its darkness. The way was unpaved and there was no street lighting visible anywhere in the city. Archer gripped the side of the carriage and grunted.

"Murder should be easy here," he said.

Carrera shrugged. "There are murders in Paris, in London, in New York. One dies in his turn, señor, here or elsewhere."

"A good philosophy."

"The only philosophy, believe me. As long as there is death, living will always be dangerous."

The carriage swung recklessly to the right between two pillars that marked a private roadway and there was a low, sprawling frame structure ahead of them, a white building with two lanterns on posts to either side of a short flight of steps. Carrera twirled his mustaches again.

"Our hotel. I leave you here to your devices, my colonel. Shall we say that we meet at midnight for discussion."

They both stepped down from the carriage. Archer bowed. "At midnight," he said.

It was a release from duty. His men, Archer knew, would be drifting into the city in groups and they would not be seeking a place to sleep as long as they had pesos in their pockets and there was life along the waterfront. So be it. They would be better soldiers after a debauch. Blackwell had been delegated to keep an eye on them, a roving commission which would enable him to sample the fleshpots also without too great loss of dignity. There remained a program for Archer himself.

The room assigned to him was pleasant but it did not hold him long. He saw to the disposal of his luggage, then surveyed himself in the bureau mirror. Since the status of Miguel Carrera's army was in doubt, he was not wearing uniform. He wore instead a wine-colored coat and pearl-gray doeskin trousers that strapped under the instep. His boldly etched features were shad-

owed by the light of two candles that flanked the mirror.

"You've come a long way, Archer," he said, "to make a fool of yourself."

The thought that he had been shamelessly tricked by Carrera still rankled in him. He blew out the candles and descended a flight of stairs.

OUTSIDE Buenos Aires stretched black, strange, foreign. A thousand stars hung low but the air was not fragrant here as it had been on the river. There was a heavy odor that betrayed the fact that the darkness hid unsanitary conditions, inadequate sewage disposal. There was a board sidewalk leading away from the hotel and Archer followed it. Occasionally a pale light gleamed from behind shutters, soft laughter or the sound of stringed instruments came from the shadows. Archer felt a stir in his blood, a prickling sensation along his spine.

It seemed to him twice that dark eyes peered at him from windows that he passed, but he was not incautious enough to stop. A man who wore a cloak and a wide brimmed hat approached him on the walk, preceded by a servant who carried a lantern. The man's eyes gleamed like an animal's in the darkness when the lantern light reflected back into them. He shot an appraising look at Archer but there were no salutations.

Buenos Aires in 1816 was a cautious community after sundown.

Ahead of him Archer saw the street widen out into a lighted square. He quickened his stride. The lanterns were suspended on pothooks from standards at the four corners of the square. A sign on the nearest of the standards proclaimed this the Plaza Victoria. At the north side of the square a lofty cathedral loomed. There were a number of carriages waiting and several men and women conversing on the cathedral steps. This, at least, was a place where living people gathered. Archer made his way around the west side of the plaza. There was a low-roofed, ancient-looking building here that had, somehow, the odor of politics about it. There were lights in several of the windows, two men in animated discussion on the steps. Archer turned his head toward the line of carriages, broke stride and stopped.

In the most imposing of the carriages a young woman sat alone. Archer saw first the dark, luminous eyes, then the soft oval of a young face, the tint of rose coloring in olive cheeks. The girl dropped her glance and spread a fan that hid her mouth. She was wearing a black lace mantilla and Archer saw that her hair was parted in the middle, dropping to either shoulder in glistening black braids. She was the breath of beauty that he had been seeking unconsciously in his aimless walk. For the space of a held breath he stood there, then a foot scraped on the board sidewalk beside him.

Archer turned swiftly and a glove lashed him across the mouth. He stared into the hot, angry eyes of a man whose head came scarcely to his shoulders. The man wore a scarlet cavalry jacket, frogged and epauletted with gold, a tricorn hat, tight blue breeches and shiny boots. Having struck the blow, he took one step backward and stood with his arms folded.

Archer felt hot blood in his face and his heavy fists knotted. Every instinct called to him to lash out, but the very calm of the man who had struck another twice his size restrained him. The absurdity of hitting so small a man was obvious, as was the reason for the blow. This was a foreign land with customs of its own. The dapper officer had resented Archer's staring at the girl in the carriage. There was a code about all this. Archer's lips tightened.

"You struck me!" he said grimly.

"For cause. You are entitled to satisfaction."

"When?"

"Dawn. My seconds will attend you."

The officer reached into a hidden pocket in his jacket, withdrew a card and proffered it. Archer accepted it, glanced at it. *Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza*, he read, *Colonel, The Black Hussars, Republic of Chile.*

Rodriguez was waiting expectantly. Archer met his eyes. "Unfortunately I do not have a card," he said. "I am Craig Archer and your seconds will find me at Casa Residencial."

*Colonel Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza of the Black Hussars.*

"No card, señor! You are—"

"Of rank equal to yours."

Archer bowed. Rodriguez seemed relieved. His heels clicked together and he bowed from the waist, then with a precise military turn, he left Archer standing there and strode to the carriage. The coachman waited until he had taken his place inside, then mounted to his high seat and cracked his whip sharply.

As the carriage moved off, Archer had the impression of dark eyes looking at him over a fan; a momentary impression like something out of a dream. He shook his shoulders but the sense of unreality would not leave him.

"A duel!" he said, "and with a Colonel of Chile. Well, Carrera promised me that I would not be bored."

A few curious bystanders leaned against the government building and eyed him curiously, but although the meaning of the encounter must have been obvious, there was no intense interest, no excitement. A challenge to a duel obviously was not such a rare thing in Buenos Aires. Archer smiled. It was not too rare a thing in Washington, either. A duel had been fought within a hundred yards of the White House while Archer was still in West Point and he knew of two more following the debacle at Bladensburg.

"I wish that I knew the lady for whose glance I am fighting," he said.

He was thinking more of the oval face below the mantilla and the eyes above the fan than he was of the approaching duel. He could not recall her hands and decided that she had worn gloves. He did not know if she was short or tall. His forehead creased.

"She is small," he said, "a dainty figure of a woman. I am sure of it. But what is this fire-eater to her? Her husband, perhaps?"

The thought disturbed him so he decided that the man was not her husband. The streets on which he walked were dark, occasional people passed him, servants preceding them with lanterns, but he neither noticed the dark nor needed a lantern. The glow of high adventure was on him. This country was good, the gods of fighting men dwelt here—and its women were beautiful.

IN HIS room at Casa Residencial, Archer found Carrera waiting. The Chileno was pacing up and down. He had not even troubled to remove his cape nor the wide-brimmed black hat that shadowed his face. The laughter was gone out of him and he looked less the conspirator now than the man of action.

"Things have gone unfavorably for us, my friend," he said.

"How?" Archer threw himself down on a chair, his legs thrust out in the manner of a man whose habit is boots.

"These Portenos* have embraced the cause of O'Higgins and he has had the guile to offer command to one of them."

"An Argentine in command of the army to liberate Chile?"

"Precisely!"

"What does that mean to us?"

*The citizens of Buenos Aires were called Portenos.

Carrera stood in the middle of the floor, his legs far apart. "It means a firing squad without ceremony if we wait until a courier reaches General San Martin and returns to Buenos Aires."

"San Martin is the Argentine commander of Chile's army?"

"Yes. A stern moralist. A single-minded fool. He will brook no irregularities."

Archer's eyes held Carrera's. This was the man who had sworn to him that he was the authorized representative of Chile's patriots, the man for whom he had recruited a fighting force which was scattered now, unarmed, over half of Buenos Aires. Carrera, assuredly, would not like a man who brooked no irregularities. He was pacing the floor again.

"We must gather our men," he said, "to a place that I know beyond the city. Our stores will be transported there. There we shall dress our men in uniform, equip them—"

"*My* men!" Archer corrected him.

"Under me." Carrera's voice was sharp. There was nothing of the effeminate dandy about him now. "You dance to my tune or the hangman's, my friend. Gold can do what bullets cannot."

Archer had wondered about the gold. Miguel Carrera seemed to possess it in inexhaustible amounts. Money alone would not have seduced Archer, but Carrera's possession of enough to charter a vessel and outfit more than a hundred fighting men had seemed a guarantee of his backing. In the country where his backers should be, Carrera seemed to be alone but he still had gold. Archer ignored the reference to the hangman.

"From whence comes your financial aid?" he said. "That seems to be the key to our dilemma if we are locked in misunderstanding."

Carrera smiled. "A key that cannot be duplicated should not be shared," he said.

There was a soft rap on the door of the room before Archer could answer. Carrera stood transfixed and all of Archer's suspicions that the Chileno was pretending danger vanished. There was fear in the man's face. Archer rose and crossed the room in a stride.

*His legs thrust out in the manner of a man whose habit is boots.*

A servant stood outside in the hall. "Two gentlemen await the Colonel Craig Archer," he said.

"Oh, yes. I will be right down."

Archer closed the door and Carrera looked at him with narrowed eyes. "In Buenos Aires you know whom?" he said.

"A personal matter, señor."

"What personal affairs can you have here? To whom in Buenos Aires are you a colonel?"

Carrera's voice was freighted with suspicion. Archer liked neither the tone nor the man's assumption of ownership over him. "I would not advise you to interfere in my personal business, Carrera," he said.

They faced each other like duellists and it was Carrera who yielded. He shrugged his shoulders and crossed the room to a chair. "Your need of me ex-

ceeds mine of you," he said, "and there are more nooses for your neck in this country than perhaps you dream of. . . Hang yourself pleasantly, my Colonel." He sat down.

IN THE parlor downstairs two frock-coated gentlemen awaited Archer. They rose punctiliously when he entered the room, bowed, then looked bewildered when they saw that he was alone.

"Your seconds, señor?"

"I have none. I am a stranger here and must act for myself."

The two men exchanged glances. Precedent was being shattered and they were momentarily at a loss. Rallying swiftly they introduced themselves. "We have come," said the spokesman, "to afford you an opportunity to satisfy your honor for the blow which our principal, Colonel Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza, struck."

Archer bowed. "I received no explanation for the blow."

"One never explains a blow struck for the honor of a lady."

"As you will. Where do we meet?"

"Near the cemetery of Recoleta. It is the duty of your seconds to provide a carriage."

"I will assume that responsibility. And the weapons?"

"The usual weapons, señor."

"I do not know your customs."

"Ah! But the Colonel is a gentleman. He is proficient in the use of the rapier?"

Archer bowed again. "The weapon is satisfactory."

"There remains then but the matter of the surgeon. It is customary that the victor or his seconds arrange with the surgeon for his fee."

Archer smiled. "I will pay him his fee gladly."

It was a note of bravado that impressed his listeners. They gave him quick, startled glances, murmured a few polite phrases and departed. Archer stood in the middle of the room with a frown on his face.

He owed his knowledge of fencing, like his knowledge of Spanish, to the excellent instructors of West Point. As an officer of cavalry, he preferred the blade to the pistol; but his opponent was a colonel in the Army of Chile. The duel might be another embarrassment, perhaps a fatal one, if the authorities of the Argentine and of Revolutionary Chile chose to regard Carrera and himself, with the Americans who served under them, as outlaws and enemies.

He mounted the stairs thoughtfully and found Carrera in the chair where he had left him. The Chileno had ordered a bottle of brandy and had already drunk a third of it.

"Well, my conspirator," he said sneeringly, "have you sold me for thirty pieces of silver?"

Archer held his temper in check. "You owe me more than that," he said.

Carrera pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. "Across the Andes lies Chile," he said, "ruled from Lima, in Peru, by a viceroy who is the most powerful Spaniard on earth save His Majesty, Ferdinand the Seventh. On this side of the Andes, at Mendoza, is San Martin who drills an army of Portenos and of my own countrymen. In Buenos Aires are politicians who are so new to self-government that they cut each other's throats for the honor of doing what they are incapable of doing. In which camp, Americano, are you?"

Archer smiled grimly. "I am commissioned under the man who fancied himself San Martin."

Carrera flushed and took a swallow of brandy to cover his confusion. "I relieve you of your commission," he said.

"And my men?"

"I will lead them."

"You!" Archer laughed in his face. "You will lead one hundred and fifty Americans, veterans of the war against England, the wars against the Indians? You flatter yourself."

Carrera held the brandy in his mouth swishing it around like a mouthwash before swallowing it.

"I would lead them as well without a Yankee colonel," he said, "as you would lead them without a paymaster."

It was perfectly true and Archer knew it. His men had been recruited from the ranks of the restless, the adventur-

ous and the disillusioned men who had found neither gratitude nor jobs awaiting soldiers home from the wars. Such men cared little for causes, much for the rewards of high hazard.

"I could do all that you can do," he said. "I could offer them to General San Martin."

It was Carrera's turn to laugh. "To that Puritan! He would pay you not a peso. O'Higgins, for his part, would fear a man who commanded such mercenaries. He would have your head."

"I would at least be choosing my own hangman."

Carrera blinked, changed tactics swiftly. "Tell me," he said, leaning forward, "with whom do you negotiate?"

"Nobody. I told you that I have personal business."

"*Por Dios*, you are difficult!" Carrera rose to his feet. "I have advised you. Such a force as that which you command, under me, could tip the scales of power from one man to another. The contenders will know it. Not one of them will dare to employ such mercenaries, but even less will they dare to leave you free to negotiate with others. You ride a tiger, Colonel Craig Archer, and you dare not dismount."

Archer rose and faced him. "The tiger is your gift to a man who trusted you," he said slowly. "If you fulfill your agreement with me, the men I command will follow you, as I will. Betray us and we will survive you."

The two men stood there quietly measuring each other, and they both knew that they were chained to an instrument of power. The one hundred and fifty fighting men who had accompanied them to Buenos Aires demanded both a leader capable of commanding them and a paymaster with a purse; Carrera and Archer, exposed to dangers from without, needed those men which neither could command without the other.

The mutual recognition of a predicament caused them both to smile simultaneously and they bowed to each other without speaking; allies but not necessarily friends.

Carrera went out quietly and closed the door behind him. Archer crossed the room to the window and looked out at the fading stars. In a few hours he had a rendezvous with Destiny that might well cancel out all of his dealings with José Miguel Carrera.

Fugitive pictures flashed through his brain: a lace mantilla, glowing eyes and a fan. For such things as these men fought. He flexed his wrist. It was curious to think of fencing with the tips off the foils and with his heart crouched behind his blade. He laid his fingers upon his pulse and found it steady.

"Steel is more to my liking than politics," he said. "I must be careful lest I grow fond of my enemy."

## CHAPTER III

### DAWN OVER RECOLETA

THE cemetery of Recoleta is like no other cemetery in the world. It is literally a city of the dead for the deceased are not buried, they are placed in family-owned chapels or marble structures, many of which have basements and sub-basements, and most of which are adorned with statues of the saints, angels, crosses and family crests. Archer, coming upon it for the first time as the first rays of the sun were touching the highest monuments, was startled, then chilled.

There were streets rather than aisles, dwelling places rather than tombs. Here the dead were in residence. One did not have to be over-superstitious to look askance at the doorways, half expecting them to open and let out . . . . what?

There was a carriage waiting on the edge of a cleared space south of the cemetery. Archer alighted and five men looked at him solemnly.

Rodriguez was there and, with him, his two seconds who had called on Archer the night before. A man, obviously the surgeon, had spread a white cloth upon the ground and was calmly taking instruments from a black bag. The fifth man, tall and military in his bearing, approached Archer.

"Colonel Archer?" he said. "I am Colonel Herbert Danning, Army of the Andes. They told me that a country-

man of mine lacked a second for an affair of honor. I volunteer, sir."

Archer looked into the broad, red, heavy-jowled face which would have proclaimed his nationality if his accent had not.

"They misinformed you, sir," he said. "Our nations were but lately at war."

Danning raised his eyebrows. "A Yank! By faith! They were nearly right though, since I came here from your country. I will still consider it an honor to represent you."

He bowed but Archer was in touchy humor. In the midst of newly made enemies, this man was the symbol of an enemy not yet forgotten. "I dislike the appellation 'Yank,'" he said, "and to be fair to you, sir, I dislike the English. At McHenry I was cheated of the opportunity of coming to grips and your gunnery was so bad that I had not even the compensation of danger."

The Englishman straightened. "We did rather better at Bladensburg," he said curtly.

"We? You were perhaps one of the vandals who sacked and burned Washington?"

Danning's mouth was a tight line. "I was, unfortunately, one of the few Englishmen hit at Bladensburg where your countrymen covered us with much dust and themselves with little glory."

Archer advanced with his firm jaw outthrust. "By God, sir!" he said.

Danning stood immovable facing him. His eyes were coldly expressionless, then suddenly they lighted and he waved his hand.

"A war between cousins which is over," he said. "One would think that it is we who fight the duel. Colonel Archer, I am, with your consent, your second, not your antagonist."

Archer bit down on his lower lip. "And I thank you, Colonel Danning," he said. "I had the intention of representing myself."

"With these people the forms and the ceremonials are more important than the intentions and the purposes," Danning said softly. "I will inspect the weapons."

He left Archer then, to join the surgeon who, with his instruments laid out, was now standing several paces from the white cloth. At Danning's approach, the two seconds of Rodriguez detached themselves from their principal and walked out to meet him.

Archer stood where he was and stared across the cleared space at Rodriguez. The Chileno was standing calmly with his hands locked behind his back. Archer wondered if he, too, looked as cool and self-possessed. He did not feel so. His heart was hammering with such a steady precision that he had to fight the impulse to look down at his own chest. There was still a damp chill in the air although the first light of day was already promising heat. He felt the chill and his spine felt the crawling of a thousand maggots.

This was a place of death and he had brought his life out here to suspend it on the end of a slender rapier.

Danning came back to him and escorted him solemnly to where the surgeon who would act as referee was standing. Rodriguez, with his seconds, came from the opposite direction. One of the seconds stepped ahead of the other and bowed to Danning.

"My principal instructs me to say that he will accept the apology of Colonel Archer."

Danning turned his head. "It is etiquette that I reply to him," he whispered.

Archer fixed his eyes on the face of Rodriguez. "Tell him," he said firmly, "that I have nothing for which to apologize but that I will accept his apology for a blow."

Danning repeated the statement even though it had been said loudly enough for everyone present to hear. The second conferred with Rodriguez then bowed to Danning.

"My principal instructs me to say that the blow was merited," he said.

The surgeon cleared his throat. He was a short, stout man with a cleanly clipped black beard.

"Since it is the intention that this affair of honor be settled in an honorable manner," he said, "you will choose your weapons, gentlemen, and having chosen them, neither man may yield without apology."

He had the foils in a long box and Rodriguez yielded first choice to Archer. Archer selected the blade nearest to his hand, tested the temper of the steel by bending it and weighed it in his grip. It was a long, beautifully balanced weapon and the hilt fitted his hand.

"Satisfactory," he said.

THE moment had come and suddenly Archer was without nerves. He was conscious of neither heat nor cold, nor fear nor hope. Danning and the two seconds retired to one side. He stood facing Rodriguez and they each raised a sword in salute.

There were minute beads of moisture on the Chilean colonel's forehead, but his eyes were steady, fearless. There was no expression whatever in his face. He was absurdly short in comparison with Archer, but there was a compact quality in his build, a sense of compressed force. He was a soldier with a soldier's weapon in his hand which he handled with complete confidence.

The swords came down from salute and crossed.

Fury exploded behind the blade of Rodriguez. He had the graceful speed of a leopard and his rapier was living steel. Archer parried the first thrust and fell back on the defensive. He felt the shock of the other's speed in his wrist and neglected muscles in his back and shoulders answered the call to swift and deadly action. One moment he parried a thrust in tierce and felt the point of the blade touch the lobe of his ear, the next moment a ring the size of a silver dollar would have enclosed the two points that circled each other with the speed of light.

Archer was looking into the eyes of Rodriguez and he saw then only the deadly resolve to excel, to triumph, to kill. The man had ceased to be a human being, he was the servant of the sword, carried away with the lust of combat. He was stepping up the tempo of the attack, trying to beat down, to deceive or to weary the protecting arm of Archer. He was the better swordsman, the more experienced duellist—then, suddenly, he was nothing.

Archer, with a swift clockwise twist, spliced the Chileno's sword to his own and, with a vigorous side-thrust, sent it flying from his hand.

The rapier turned in the air and while it was still turning, Archer stepped back, his sword point lowered. He felt no emotion and betrayed none, but his eyes, fixed upon the Chileno, saw a man prepared to die. For a panicky instant, the other was off balance and his eyes were wide, his mouth partly open; then he straightened and his incredulous eyes returned to Archer. He saw the lowered blade and fury blazed in him.

"You humiliate me!" His voice was a fierce whisper. With one swift jerk, he tore his jacket open and his breast was bare. "Strike!" he said.

Archer's weapon came up as swiftly as though it were still engaged. He brought it to eye level and lunged. A spot of blood appeared upon the breast of Rodriguez and the man reeled back. Archer brought his blade to salute, then threw it on the grass and turned away.

Instantly the clearing, heretofore gripped in quiet tension, was an arena of motion and sound. The two seconds and the surgeon ran to Rodriguez. Danning, with three strides, was beside Craig Archer.

"Quite the only thing you could have done," he said.

Archer raised his eyes. "I drew the blade as I lunged," he said. "He is only pinked."

"Only pinked?" Danning's smile was broad with relief. "Capital! The less blood the better, what?"

He pressed Archer's shoulder with his fingers and turned to the other group which had just made the same startling discovery that their man had not been killed. Rodriguez stared for a moment at Archer, then ran to him and threw his arms about him.

"A man of honor, indeed!" he said. "I was wrong, my friend. So great a sportsman could not be guilty of the fault with which I charged you."

He leaned back, studying Archer's face, his hands still gripping the American's arms. His own face was alight with a flashing smile. "By Holy Faith,

I like you!" he said. "You must breakfast with me in my home."

Archer was bewildered by this sudden sweep of Latin temperament from a killing fury to an excess of friendship. He looked at the other man solemnly.

"It took great courage to tell me to strike," he said. "I might have killed you."

"If my hour had come, you would have struck whether you wished it or not. But, see, I rejoice that my life still has purpose. You shall rejoice with me."

Craig Archer thought of the girl in the carriage. "I am honored by your invitation," he said.

He remembered that the victor in a duel paid the surgeon's fee in this country, a rule that he had never heard before. When he had completed this detail, Danning joined him. Archer was relaxed now, the taut nerves of a half hour ago were loosened. He felt suddenly ashamed of his rudeness to this man who had suffered inconvenience to do him a service.

"You are coming with us to breakfast?" he asked.

Danning shook his head. "No. Unfortunately, I cannot. I am leaving for Mandoza in an hour."

Archer, who did not know what Mendoza might be nor where it was located, bowed. "I am sorry," he said. "I have had no opportunity of expressing my gratitude."

"Perhaps you may. Remain in the Argentine and we will meet again."

With the reserve of an Englishman, Danning volunteered no information about himself and sought none about Archer. With the caution of a man whose mission is insecure, Archer was equally uncommunicative.

"*Vaya con Dios*, then," he said.

The Englishman waved his hand and strode briskly to his carriage. Rodriguez linked his arm through that of Archer.

"Come," he said. "You must hear the story of my life and of all my daring exploits. It is the price of my friend-

ship." He chuckled throatily. "Many, *amigo*, have paid it."

Good spirits bubbled in the man of Chile and conversation flowed from him. He had fought many duels, he said, too many to remember. It was good to survive many duels because it was proof that one deserved to live and that one had a Guardian Angel. Archer, who did not ordinarily like talkative men, found a certain stimulation in the talk of Rodriguez. There was vitality in it and humor that took the curse off its boastfulness.

"It is none of my business," Archer said, at length, "but I'm curious. Suppose the duel had gone the other way, suppose you had killed me! Would you feel as you do now?"

Rodriguez was silent for a second. "It is an awkward question. You should not have asked it. But the answer is 'Yes.' If that had happened it would be because you deserved to die. I would be proud that I was a good instrument of Destiny." He chuckled. "I would even celebrate with a breakfast."

Archer smiled wryly. "The same breakfast to which I am going."

"The same, señor. What would you? The good God has given dice to the Angels and we roll against them."

*Rodriguez had ceased to be a human being. He was a servant of the sword, carried away with the lust of combat.*

THERE was a low-roofed, white house behind adobe walls and a patio in which a fountain played. This was the home of Rodriguez. He ushered Archer in with a flourish and Archer's heart jumped when he saw the girl who stood in a doorway off the patio.

He had been right about her. She was small and dainty. She was wearing a white dress with puff sleeves of dark blue that emphasized her slenderness. A tight bodice of the same color enclosed a waist that the compass of a man's hands might almost span. Her hair was plaited in glistening braids that dropped on either shoulder. Her lips were slightly parted over small, even teeth and she looked from Archer to Rodriguez with a little sweep of the eyelids that was at once discreet and provoc-

*"I am merely myself. A woman."*

ative. The voice of Rodriguez filled the patio.

"I have been vanquished in a duel, my little rosebud," he said. "I present to you my conqueror, my very good friend, the most gallant and chivalrous Colonel Craig Archer."

He ended on a sweeping bow and with a flourish that was as much a part of the bow as one dance step is part of that which follows it, he introduced the girl.

"My sister," he said.

It was enough to him that she was his sister. She needed no name of her own.

The girl extended her hand. "Welcome, señor, to our home," she said.

Archer bowed over her hand and her eyes fell before his glance. "I will receive no lovelier welcome in all South America," he said.

"You do not know, señor. South America is very big." The dark eyes flashed to his and then the long eyelashes once more screened them.

There was a table already set in a long paneled room off the patio and Rodriguez was eager for his breakfast. Archer was seated across the table from the girl, but he discovered early that conversation was not an art to be practiced at the table of Don Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza. The dapper little colonel had not been engaging in mere humor when he said that the price of his friendship was to hear the story of his life. He talked freely, fluently and with gestures.

"You see in me, my friend," he said, "the most colorful character in Chile. It is true as any will attest; be it the great General O'Higgins or the humble Indio. In every corner of these two nations my fame has spread. By Saint Christopher, that is the truth and only the hypocrite denies his own fame."

His voice flowed and took high points of drama with surges of power. He had been of the revolutionary party from the beginning. "How could a man of heart and courage be otherwise? Spain loves not this country nor her children who have labored in it. Spain cares only to loot us of all possessions. Power over us is given to favorites of the court who come here to rule, not to men who are born of the country and who work for the country and love it. The Spaniard of Spain is an exploiter, the Spaniard of South America is a developer. It is thus, señor, and Argentina is already free of court puppets. Chile awaits her hour."

Rodriguez drank wine with his breakfast, flagons of it that flowed down his throat like water. His eyes were bright and there was a hypnotic quality in him that held Archer in spite of himself.

"The soul of a revolution is intrigue," the Chileno said. "I command troops badly because never will I say in one word what I can say in ten. But to inform the people? To recruit soldiers? By the splendor of God, señor, there is no man in South America who can do as well as I."

He had, it seemed, gone into towns heavily garrisoned by Loyalist troops and recruited under their very noses. He had worn the robes of a Franciscan on occasion, the rags of a beggar on another. For one full week he had worn a Spanish uniform in a Spanish-held town and he had once served as footman for the Spanish Governor of Chile, without detection, after disposing of the rightful footman and taking his uniform.

"I am the master of disguise, a genius of persuasion," he said. "I could sell the

coals of hell to a sacristan for the heating of holy water. It is thus that I serve, but I have been, too, on the battlefields. When things go badly there, they say to me, 'Colonel, the men falter.' So I go to these men and I talk. *Sacré*, how I talk! You should hear me. These men who are tired, discouraged, they listen. Soon they believe that it is better that they charge and die horribly than that they should go home and live comfortably. That, my Colonel, is a great art."

Archer grinned. "You sound pretty good."

Rodriguez raised his eyebrows. "Ah, you think I boast? I am too incredible to be true? Señor, I am flattered."

He seemed about to launch into another chapter but a servant appeared at his shoulder. There was, it seemed, a messenger at the door with a message which must be given to no one save Colonel Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza. Rodriguez excused himself and rose. Archer leaned across the table. The girl raised her eyes to his.

"My brother does not boast," she said. "He does all those things and more."

"Suppose you talk about you. I will learn about him from him."

She made a deprecatory gesture with one small hand. "Of me there is little to say. I am merely myself. A woman."

"Is it so terrible to be a woman?"

She flushed slightly but her eyes were provocatively level. "It is wonderful to be a woman," she said.

"And I do not even know your name."

"It is Ysabel. Do you approve it?"

"I could learn to love it."

The door opened and Rodriguez came back. The sparkle and the friendliness were gone out of him. He looked as grim as he had been on the dueling field.

"Señor Archer, if you please," he said. "You are the Colonel of what?"

Craig Archer looked up into eyes that were gravely accusing. "A Colonel of Volunteers for Chile," he said.

"Of mercenaries for Miguel Carrera, perhaps?"

"I serve under General Carrera. He is a General of Chile."

"He *was* a General of Chile. His disgraceful conduct cost us the battle that condemned us to exile." Rodriguez slapped the letter in his hand. "Until I received this advice, I did not know that he had returned to Buenos Aires where he is unwelcome."

The Chileno seemed to grow a little, so straight did he hold himself. "You have abused my hospitality, señor. Had I known you were a mercenary and of Carrera my door would be closed to you."

Archer flushed and rose in his place. "I am myself. I expect to be accepted or rejected *for* myself."

"That cannot be. A man and the cause that he serves are inseparable. Consider, señor, the introduction to my sister unmade, the hand of my friendship withdrawn."

The two men stood facing each other and this was harder than the moment of challenge. Rodriguez was not hot anger now, he was cold dignity. Facing him in his own home, Archer had no alternative. He threw one look at Señorita Ysabel Rodriguez. The girl's eyes were downcast. She would not look at him. He bowed stiffly to the Chileno.

"Señor," he said, "I regret your attitude."

He wheeled then and strode out across the patio. He swore deep in his chest but he did not swear at Rodriguez. He swore rather at Miguel Carrera, the millstone around his neck and the author of all his troubles.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SECOND FOOL

MIGUEL CARRERA was pacing his own room angrily when Archer returned to Casa Residencial. He was wearing loose, dark trousers, with a red sash, a shirt with a soft collar and a rose colored cravat, a short coat and a black hat with a sweeping brim. There was a sinister splendor in his appearance and his eyes, when they fixed upon Archer, had flame in their depths.

"This!" he said. "I will not support it. Where I am beset by enemies, you conspire behind my back."

"Careful!" Archer stood with his legs braced. "I do not accept accusations!"

"Accept or not! You serve me or another. If another, then you have a second in command whom I may promote."

"Thank you for the warning. Your contract is with me."

"The contract expires with the man."

"And if he is a good man, he takes others with him."

Carrera threw up his hands. "*Madré Santisima!* That I should be so bedeviled!" He leaned toward Archer. "Each hour in Buenos Aires increases our peril and you, on whom I depend, vanish for hours. Where are your men?"

Archer threw himself down on a chair. "Without seeing them, I can tell you. They are asleep in, or near, the cantinas where last night they spent their pesos. What would you expect? They are not sailors. They were on the sea for fifty days."

His quiet tone seemed to reassure Carrera. The Chileno dropped into another chair and shielded his eyes with one slender hand. "You must assemble them south of the Riochuelo where there is a problem of jurisdiction between the city and the province. I will send a guide for you. At an estancia that is but a few miles away, our expedition will equip."

Archer rose. "That is all that I need. Confine yourself, hereafter, to discussing military business with me and you will have one less physical risk to fear."

Carrera's eyes shifted nervously. "I was hasty, perhaps," he said. "This nest of snakes oppresses me."

"They are your snakes, not mine." Archer shrugged and moved toward the door. "Where is that lieutenant of yours?"

"He is below. I will introduce you."

There was a short, dark man waiting who wore dark trousers and a white shirt, with no jacket. His attire was far from military but he held himself like a soldier. His name was Juan Garcia. Archer looked him over with one curt glance. The man might be a guide, he might also be a spy.

"Let us go!" he said.

"The Colonel will want a carriage or a horse?"

Archer snorted. "A horse, naturally."

Lieutenant Garcia smiled tightly. "These colonels of Buenos Aires who let others fight for the freedom they enjoy are fond of carriages," he said.

Archer's irritation with the lieutenant vanished. Whatever Garcia might be, he was a soldier and not enamored, evidently, of politicians. There had been colonels, captains and even lieutenants in Washington who were fond of carriages: one of the compelling reasons why Craig Archer was in South America.

"We'll leave the carriages to those who do not fight," he said. "Procure those horses!"

"They are procured and wait, Señor El Colonel. If you wished a carriage I would have had to arrange for it."

Archer grinned. He was beginning to like this Garcia. He strode down the driveway to the gate and there were two horses waiting there in the care of a groom, magnificent animals with saddles ornamented in silver. Garcia stood aside respectfully while the groom led the finer animal of the two to Archer—a proud-maned chestnut with a fine, challenging eye. Archer swung into the saddle, felt the restless fight in the animal under him and heaved a sigh of relief.

Come snakes or duels or sudden death, a man could meet Destiny with dignity when mounted thus. Garcia mounted and Archer turned his horse down the street that he had walked last night—the way to the waterfront.

*(To be continued)*

BACK OUR FIGHTING MEN—

BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

# NATIVE SON

By
ROY YONGE

THE Japanese officer was squatted on his haunches eating the field ration of beef out of a tin. He did not seem to be in any hurry. Having achieved his immediate objective, he had a little time to spare. Now and again he looked up from his food to inspect Henry Pomare. He did not speak, however, until he had finished with the tin, wiping it out clean to the metal as a cat's tongue might. He did

ILLUSTRATED BY I. B. HAZELTON

*"I say, what are you?" the Japanese officer asked again.*

one thing at a time. First food, then questioning the prisoner.

"What are you?" he said.

His English would have been easy to understand in normal circumstances, but Henry Pomare's circumstances were anything but normal. There was a large bump on the side of his head and a red-clotted bullet groove across one cheek. The metallic ringing sound that these produced in his ears was so loud that he might have been standing in a foundry rather than in the wet heavy silence of the Papuan jungle. It made it difficult to hear. He was forced to ask the Japanese officer to repeat himself.

"I say, what are you?"

There was a man with a bayonet standing behind Henry. He was at least eight inches shorter than Henry but the bayonet made him long. The other Japanese of this advance group were scattered here and there finishing their field rations before probing on again toward Port Moresby.

There were no definite positions in this jungle fighting. The Japanese might be in front of you, they might be at the side, they might have filtered through behind. It was a stealthy groping war of surprise and counter-surprise, of advance groups cautiously feeling out to establish contact, grappling violently for a few fierce minutes, then fading back or advancing. The only thing of which you could be certain was that the odds would be against you.

"Did you say, what am I?" Henry asked.

HE IMAGINED that he was the only survivor of his group, though he hoped that some of the rest had contrived to withdraw successfully from the sudden ambushing volley. At first he could not understand why his captors had permitted him to live. He was not an important prisoner. He knew that he was as ordinary as they come. Just a large young man who played a superlative game of rugby. There was not much else to be said for him, and his family often dwelt on the fact. He feared that, except for his ability with a football, he was in the way of being the family's black sheep. He had wished more than once that there was less in the Pomare name to live up to.

He was beginning to understand now that he had been kept alive for the moment merely so that the Japanese officer could get some information from him. Well, there could be no harm in telling him what he was.

"I'm a New Zealander," he said.

"Of course I know that," the officer said. "But what kind of New Zealander? I have never seen a New Zealander like you before."

Did he mean, where was he born? "In Auckland," Henry began, but then he understood. It was his dark skin.

"Oh, I'm a Maori," he said.

The officer rose and inspected him more closely. "So you are a Maori," he said with interest. "You are a full-blooded Maori?"

"I think so," Henry said. He was not quite sure what full-blooded meant; he was not familiar with the term.

"All your people were Maoris?"

"Oh, yes," Henry said.

"How many of you are there in New Guinea?"

Did he mean, how many Maoris among the forces defending Port Moresby, or how many men altogether? In any event, the question could not be answered, even if Henry had known. He touched the groove in his cheek, which was itching fiendishly, and shook his head.

"You do not wish to answer?"

Henry had never set up as a wit, but now a retort occurred to him which he thought quite clever. "Well," he said, smiling, "the last figure I heard was an even two million, but I won't swear to it." He supposed that he would now be run through without further ceremony by the little man behind. He accepted the idea without horror as a fact of life. Obviously they had nothing to gain by keeping him alive. He was not completely a fatalist, however, and he watched the officer's face alertly. There would be a change in expression, even if almost imperceptible, before he gave the signal; and Henry resolved that at that moment he would

make a dive for him. Nothing much would come of it but it was better to be killed while doing something than while waiting like a sheep for slaughter.

But the officer still seemed to be in no hurry. He showed no anger, nor did he return to his question. He regarded Henry as if he found in him an object of considerable curiosity.

"I have read about the native New Zealanders," he said. "The Maoris. There are not a great many of you left, are there?"

Henry had to admit that he did not know.

"Let me see; when was it that they began to take your country away from you? 1830? 1840?" He seemed to be a very knowing fellow.

"I'm afraid I've always been hazy on dates," Henry said apologetically.

"The strange thing is that those of you who are left are now fighting the Britishers' war for them! Fighting people who are much closer to you racially than your officers and government who tell you what to do! How do you explain that?"

Henry did not know what to say. He frowned in perplexity.

"But I suppose you never thought of it in that way," the officer went on. "You, the native New Zealanders, don't think for yourselves, you don't stand up and insist on your rights and speak for yourselves. That is because they see to it that you don't know too much. For example"—he looked up sharply—"how is your country governed?"

Henry was painfully ill at ease, but the officer was merciless.

"They tell you that you are fighting for your country. But what is your country now? Who rules it? Who makes the laws? Do you? Do you have any share in your own country now? Just think of it for a minute, honestly, and tell me. And then try to tell me why you are fighting for the British."

Henry did his best to think of it, but it was no good. He could have kicked himself for the stupid fool he was. "I tell you, though," he said, "our major back at the base, he's a brainy cove. He knows all that stuff. If you could meet him—"

*The Maori is a first-class fighting man but his war dance doesn't tell the whole story.*

For the time being this was the end of their conversation. Flame and smoke ripped from a jungle thicket, and Henry automatically slid for the ground. He knew with immediate and acute understanding what had happened. Some of his own group had escaped after all and come working around from the side and set this bunch of Japs dead to rights.

The Japanese officer had not been badly hurt. He lay on the ground with a bullet in his leg, and when the shooting was over Henry picked him up and slung him over his shoulder.

"I don't want you to think we're all as thick as I am," he explained. "So I'll try to fix it for you to meet our major. I never did catch on to history and dates and that stuff, but you just ask him—he can tick it off at you like a school teacher. Whatever they call the damn thing at home—Parliament? or is it House of Representatives?—maybe it's both, I don't know—but anyway, when there's not a war on, the old major's a member of it. He's an uncle of mine, so I guess he's what you call a full-blooded Maori, too. Oh, I tell you, he's a bright one!"

# MISSION TO MAURITANIA

By GEORGES SURDEZ

*The mast split, collapsed, lead ricochetted from the motor. The giant shadow flashed by, the silvery machine slid over the sea, turned.*

ILLUSTRATED BY I. B. HAZELTON

THE cruiser drove through the swell, a steel shell almost six hundred feet in length, more than nine thousand tons rushing at better than twenty-five knots. The ports were closed, but the ventilators sucked in the salty night air over the dark sea, the sea that slithered and swished against the plates. When the course changed, at frequent intervals because of the constant dread of submarines, the deck throbbed underfoot and an unseen object somewhere vibrated like a tuning fork. Beyond the locked doors, forward, aloft and below, hundreds of men watched or slept close to their combat stations as the ship

tacked endlessly off the distant Mauritanian Coast.

Nick faced the four Britishers as if they had been judges. They wore neatly pressed whites, three of them were in uniform, with multicolored ribbons arrayed on their breasts, brass buttons, gold braid glistening under the electric light at collars, shoulders and cuffs. Four comfortable, prosperous gentlemen, who had bathed and shaved that very day, whose hands showed clean and pinkish against the cloth.

"You consider the document acceptable, then?"

THE oldest Britisher, the one who wore no uniform, no gold braid and no ribbons, extended a finger towards the dog-eared, greasy identification booklet on the board. He was a round, short man close to sixty, with a very pink face and gray hair that seemed painted on his skull.

"Quite satisfactory, yes, sir."

The small, plump hand flipped the cover open, the light blue eyes behind the lenses darted from the grimy paper to the man it purported to describe. At that moment, Nick felt almost like the character he was to assume in a few hours. He was dirty and unkempt; ragged khaki slacks covered his lean legs, his sockless feet were shod in roughly made sandals, a tattered, yellow Moorish *gandoura* draped his tanned, muscular torso.

"You're Boutros Abdelnour?"

"Yes, sir."

"Born July 19th, 1914, at Damascus, Syria. Height: one meter seventy-six; weight: eighty-six kilogs; color of eyes: gray-blue; color of hair and beard: dark; forehead: medium; nose: strong; chin: medium. Yes, your nose might be said to be strong."

"I'm possibly an inch taller," the ragged man declared. "I weigh much less, but that will be presumed to be due to my captivity among the Ouled-Delim."

"When did you arrive in Africa?"

"In 1936, sir, at Dakar. I lived in Casamance, with a cousin in general trade there." Nick evaded further questions. "Don't worry, sir. I've memorized the notes you gave me to study when I came aboard."

"No need to worry about the original owner turning up," the round Englishman announced. "He died some months ago in a small bush station on the Gold Coast. There is not the slightest possibility that any patrol officer in this region knows that, and only the most remote chance of meeting one personally acquainted with him." He tapped the booklet. "The necessary alterations can be detected under a microscope. But it is hardly likely that it will be subjected to such a close scrutiny unless you are suspected and under arrest. Then it would not matter."

"Not much, no, sir," Nick agreed, thinking that it would very much matter to him.

"I say, you speak English extremely well for a Levantine."

"Naturally, sir." Nick smiled for the first time. His make-up had deceived them. "You see, although a volunteer with the French Air Force, I am an American."

"Thought you were not a Syrian, not even a Frenchman," the youngest of the Britishers declared. He laughed. "But you do look the complete gyppo!"

"Smoke?" the round man laid a long, thin silver case on the table and Nick took one. As if that had been a signal, the two motionless officers came to life. The big, massive one—a commodore or a rear-admiral, Nick was not sure which—produced a cigar. The slender, aristocratic fellow with the sleek black hair, whom he presumed to be the ship's intelligence officer, reached for a cigarette. And the husky, youthful flying officer, filled a very large pipe.

"We hope all goes well for you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Aye," the beefy commodore spoke up in a voice almost too much in character, "you will render a useful service."

"You're American?" The intelligence officer lifted his brows. "Odd they picked you for this show. Most peculiar requirements, as I understand you know."

"Not odd at all, sir," Nick replied. "An active man with some flying experience was needed. Also, with a knowledge

of the Western Sahara, able to speak Arabic, with some acquaintance with dialects. I spent much of my childhood in the Near East and North Africa. My father represented an American oil company, you see. When I was sent home to college, at nineteen, I met a chap about my own age who had a great deal of money and an insatiable passion for the Sahara.

"I knew Arabic, I had lived in Algeria, and he suggested that I go with him on a vacation. Wanted to take pictures, visit odd places. We went, and instead of two months, we stayed two years. No motor travel, no tourist trips. By camel, with small caravans, in one of the toughest regions of the desert, south of Tafilalet, west of Bechar. He loved the Sahara and died of it. Heart gave out after a very hard trip when we ran out of water.

"I became reasonably fluent in Shloh, which is hard to learn, and very fluent in Hassani, the tongue of the people out there—" Nick nodded in the direction of the coast. "You might call it archaic Arabic. Like Elizabethan speech to modern English."

"But how did they locate you in the aviation, in England?"

"By a very natural chain, as you'll see. They needed someone who had flown. And a number of the French pilots have had Saharan experience, most as soldiers, a few of the older chaps as civilians. The Latecoere Company ran a line from Morocco to Dakar, over the Rio de Oro and Mauritania, for years. They had pilots stationed at many fields, Agadir, Cisneros, Juby, Port-Etienne—"

"Right," the round man put in. "In fact, much of our information comes from surveys made by that line, and the very man you are to get in contact with worked for them five years, flying as an interpreter for the crew in case of a forced landing."

"You saw active service in the flying force?"

"Yes, sir."

NICK almost shrugged. He had seen active service and a good deal of it. Eight months over the Maginot and Siegfried Lines, the heartbreaking weeks of the French collapse, then with the London defense and the Coastal patrols. Had he been in uniform, the question would not have been asked, for he had three French decorations and two British. But he had been told that he would have to land in Morocco or Mauritania, in disguise, and he knew that sunburn is not improvised, so he had assumed the proper garments. As it was, a close examination of his feet might betray him. Saharan footgear leaves the feet particularly calloused.

"You have used a parachute?"

"Yes, sir. Twice through necessity, and many times while in training in France."

"You know what you are to undertake?"

"No, sir."

That was the truth. No one had given him lengthy explanations. He had reported from Scotland, where his squadron had been stationed, to Free French Headquarters, on Victoria Quay, London. He had answered questions, proved his qualifications. Then, almost without transition, he had been hurried by plane to Gibraltar. There he had obtained his garments—Tangier was but eight miles away—and boarded a destroyer. No one had spoken to him on that craft, no one knew of his identity, of his mission save, possibly, the captain.

Even aboard this very cruiser, his position had been strange from the beginning. Few of the crew had seen him hoisted aboard, he had been taken below at once. He had spent the intervening time reading notes concerning one Boutros Abdelnour, Syrian merchant, memorizing place and family names, dates, details of background, education and travel.

His sole conversation had been with the round little civilian, whom someone had addressed as Sir Andrew.

An odd chap, that old guy, Nick thought, so very British in appearance, yet a linguist who spoke pure, Voltairian French without an accent, who shifted from one dialect of Arabic to another without effort, using the speech of Cairo, that of Lebanon, of Tunisia, of Marrakesh. A soft little student, on the surface, but with a disturbing quality of

ruthlessness beneath. Nick knew that it would not do to fail him, that the man would not condone apologies, excuses, alibis.

"Tell him the situation, Barcey," Sir Andrew addressed the naval intelligence officer. He added, with his icy irony: "He will understand your English rather well, you know."

"I feared they'd been a bit over-realistic in London," the other said, his face tinged with red, "that they had sent us a real Syrian. They're quite intelligent, granted, but often very slow in getting results. In our sort of work, don't you know? Oh well—been having our hands full out here. Seems to be no end of submarines, and the shipping to and from South Africa and the East, passes through a zone three, four hundred miles west of this coast.

"We've had rather good luck on the whole. Of course, troopers are properly convoyed, we must have the guns about to handle a raider should one break loose from one of the French ports held by the Huns.

"But in the past few weeks, quite a number of cargoes have been sunk, and we out here have been getting it very hot from home."

Sir Andrew lighted another cigarette, and put in: "You know, although we are a maritime nation, a great many of us never really understand geography. Mauritania alone is seven times the area of England. Yet if a miserable trawler escapes our notice on this deserted coast, there is the devil of a row.

"On the other hand, as Barcey will tell you, we must be very damn careful not to start a shooting conflict with the French!"

"Quite so, sir," Barcey admitted. "We know that their subs refit and refuel somewhere on the coast, between Juby and Blanc, or even Dakar. But where? That we shall not find out, probably. We must handle the blighters one by one. We have air patrols, of course, out of Bathurst, from cruisers and destroyers, from the convoys. Naturally, along most of the stretches of this coast, we need not worry too much about territorial waters of France and Spain. The Spaniards are inactive, and the French patrol on schedule. Nevertheless, the last three months, we have lost several machines."

"Shot down, sir?" Nick asked.

"We have reason to believe they were, yes." The naval officer lifted one hand helplessly. "Shot down by pursuit planes, combat machines. You see, it is very difficult for us to obtain such machines down here. They're needed at home and at the various other fronts. And the amphibians we have are what you'd call easy meat for a Messerschmitt of the latest type."

"Messer-pursuits would have to be based nearby," Nick said.

"Precisely. Within fifty or a hundred miles of the ocean."

"And it is certain that—"

"Oh, quite. One of the pilots, from this very ship as it happens, had time to report. Said he was being attacked by what seemed to be a Hun Messer, but without markings. Marlow, here"—he nodded towards the flying-officer—"went off at once and must have reached the approximate vicinity of the fighting inside thirty minutes. But he could see nothing—"

"WE nosed about a bit," Marlow related. "Up and down the coast, you know. Then Harris—who was my observer, you know—suggested we have a look-see inland. Went about sixty miles, circled, then we had to return for petrol. Saw nothing, absolutely nothing. But while observation is easy over the flat, those damn ridges throw large shadows. Couldn't spot anything of poor Hunter. That was the chap in the other machine, you know. Must have crashed into the sea and been properly broken up. I wanted to start again after taking on petrol, but it was no go."

"Well, we knew that the Hun had probably gone to get ammunition and that it was no use sending out a single plane. As luck would have it, there were no other planes available around."

"I see." Nick nodded. ""And you don't think the German is based on one of the French fields?"

"Oh, we'd know that, you know," Barcey protested. "There are any num-

ber of Germans in Dakar, in Senegal now, Armistice Commission chaps. But no German machines. And the cruising range of a pursuit plane limits the field. One of ours was brought down quite a distance out to sea. You can use the spot as a center and describe a three hundred mile circle and know rather well that the base is in the land area enclosed."

"Deserted as the region is," Nick declared, "there are natives everywhere; an aviation base, no matter how well hidden, would be known very soon to the hunters. Why, those fellows can identify a man by his tracks, and strange tracks would be followed out of mere curiosity."

"We do not claim the natives do not know," Sir Andrew put in. "As a matter of fact, we have agents who have reported the presence of strangers in the zone we have investigated. But the base will be concealed, probably in some ravine, carefully camouflaged. Knowing the approximate location is useless. We must be able to destroy the place. And we must destroy it swiftly, by surprise, before the French have time to protest an invasion of their territory. We must know the exact spot. Then we can bring out a carrier and send thirty to forty planes to knock them about."

"And the French will not protest?"

"After an accomplished fact?" Sir Andrew smiled. "The damage being done, the Germans will not put pressure on them to protect the spot. And, without excellent reason, the French authorities will not admit that they permitted a German base on their territory. And they will scarcely try to make an incident of the bombing by our machines of a few acres of desert! So, your mission is to go ashore and locate the exact spot, to give us the map readings. Having had experience, you will be able to discount at once many of the stories the natives will doubtless tell you. You know where a fast machine can land and where not."

Nick thought the matter over in silence for a moment.

"It occurs to me, sir, that as you have agents ashore among the natives you might have been able to trace shipments of petrol to the base. They must get petrol from somewhere. And petrol must come to them from St. Louis or Dakar, or even Podor, but in any case by truck or camel. Even supposing that the Germans are supplied with petrol and oil by one of the known French bases, the stuff must be transported to the secret base somehow."

"We've thought of that, young fellow," Sir Andrew admitted. "We have watched not only the French but the Spaniards' petrol supplies. But the shipments have been normal, accounted for. The pursuit planes must receive their fuel by air, from Europe. Costly method, I grant you. But heavy investments in small things often pay enormous dividends in war. If one of their raiders did break through to this coast, how helpful the presence of a land-based combat aviation would be in an emergency. If the *Panzerschiffe Admiral Graf Spee* had had the support of a few planes based in Uruguay or Argentina, it might very well have escaped destruction.

"And if they contrived to slip a raider carrying eleven-inch guns into the Gulf, to intercept some large convoy out of Sierra Leone, that ship would have paid for herself before being cornered and sunk. The Germans have shown a tendency to gamble a bit in this show. The *Bismarck* they knew to be doomed, but they hoped she would go in a blaze of glory. At that, she got the poor old *Hood*. There again, a few land-based planes would have saved the day for the Hun. Or rather delayed the end. You have the maps, Barcey?"

"Yes, Sir Andrew."

"They're excellent, Si Boutros Abdelnour," the round man said, smiling. "Corrected from photographs. The place is somewhere inside the circle." As Nick studied the maps, he went on: "You'll be landed before dawn. In this settlement, more or less permanent, you will find our agent, whose name you read in my notes. He will accompany you. If there is any urgent information to convey, write it down for him. He will know how to have it relayed to us. You have memorized the names and addresses in St. Louis and Dakar, in case you should be taken south? In ten days, you will

try to be at the place indicated, where young Marlow or one of his colleagues can pick you up. You understand the details of the signals?"

"Yes, sir. I have picked up agents in France several times."

"If you are arrested by the French, we shall know at once, as whoever arrests you will report to Headquarters. Even if you are identified under your true name, keep on denying. The situation of our agents in French territory is somewhat different from normal. You will not be shot unless there is no other way out for them."

"That is good news, sir."

"Even if there is a chance to escape reporting to the French, I would report, in your place. That is what Boutros Abdelnour would have done. Don't be impatient. You have several days ahead of you."

"I know the Sahara, sir," Nick replied. "In the desert, impatience is a fatal disease."

## CHAPTER II

### SOLO TREK

NICK was as isolated as if he had been dropped on the moon.

He stood ankle deep in loose sand atop a small dune, staring at the undulations of soil sweeping towards the circular horizon, slowly turning tawny in the flush of dawn.

The leap from the plane had been the easiest thing. The observer had nodded and Nick had dropped. One of his knees pained somewhat from the hard landing, one forearm was scraped by the dragging of the parachute in the night wind. The last minutes of darkness he had spent in concealing the parachute under sand and loose stones. With the 'chute, he had hidden an English rifle, one hundred rounds of ammunition, a small bag of gold coins, and a two-quart canteen which he had taken the precaution to empty by more than half. His body had moisture for a while.

It was possible that he would never return to the spot. Yet one never knew. At worst, later, he could give some native tracker the approximate location, and the man would find the stuff.

The plan had been to drop him four or five miles from the settlement. There was only one landmark, a faint outline to the northwest, the edge of a stone *sif*. The camp he sought was somewhere beyond that, on the left. And instead of four or five miles, he knew that it must be fifteen to eighteen. Perhaps the observer had given him the nod a bit too late, perhaps he had hesitated. And in a machine hurtling across the sky, minutes were several miles.

Nick knew that the hours separating him from night would be as dangerous as any to follow. Fifteen or twenty miles afoot in the desert was a task. He might very easily collapse and die of fatigue and thirst.

"It's no more than twelve," he consoled himself. "I can make it by noon."

In his character as an escaping captive of the Ouled-Delim, who richly merit their name, Children of the Louse, he could not carry much beyond his rags, the identification booklet dangling with an old clasp-knife in the inside pocket of the *gandoura*. He could not wear a sun helmet, so he had made a turban out of a strip of cloth. He could not carry water, as a water-bottle of British manufacture would have been suspicious and there had been no way of procuring a small goatskin.

He started forward, tried to swing along. A long, lanky silhouette alone in the universe, the hub of an immense circle of sand. He thought he had remembered the murderous heat of the Sahara, the crushing glare. But his brain had refused to remember their full horror. He rediscovered that a man does not swing in long strides on loose sand, that he slides and slips, that he progresses at a shuffle.

Forgotten little sinews in his legs soon turned to fiery filaments. The pain flowed up from his ankles, flamed in his calves and thighs, gripped at his loins and flashed in spasms to his breast. He was hard enough, yet too soft for the desert.

A false identification document and a pocket-knife, that was his baggage to achieve wonders! And how happy he had been to get the chance, to be select-

ed from a mass of men in uniform for a "special mission calling for great endurance and individual resources."

"You'll be working with the Intelligence Office," the French major who had interviewed him in London had said. "You can refuse. But it's service as dangerous, as hard as that you are doing now and which few men could do." A very clever fellow, that major, who knew how to coax with compliments. "We have found any number of men with qualifications, but they lack two of your qualities: youth and strength."

The sun was bobbing up rapidly, beating against his body almost with a material impact. His right side was exposed, and the rays penetrated through the light stuff he wore, and he felt thirst very soon.

"Imagination," he decided. "Can't be thirsty yet. Drank more than a quart before starting."

Yes, over one quart, and he had lived for six days on a cup of brackish water per day. And for two days more without a single drop, tightening a rope around his middle, chewing a rag. He had won out, and so had his friend, Richard. He too had reached the well, but two days later, without warning, he had collapsed and died.

"I could take it. But I've been away too long."

The young flyer must be back aboard the ship by now. What were a couple of hundred miles to a fast plane? He was having breakfast, doubtless, eggs and bacon, or kidneys. There were big decanters of thick glass on the table, filled with pure, cool water, and the sunlight passed through them and made golden circles on the cloth.

Boutros, names and dates. And he must find that German camp, ascertain its map-bearings. Nick knew the desert and its people. No matter where the Nazis hid, the natives would know.

IN THE monotonous travel of the Sahara, hours and days did not count. A glitter on the remote horizon, a smudge of smoke, a fluttering rag, a strange noise, all were noted, investigated by cameleers. A party might wander thirty miles from its straight course to find out a small detail. They would tell chance travelers, the story would be retold, commented and enlarged upon.

And what an astonishing power of description those natives had. They were accustomed to observing in their routine existence, missed nothing, the shape of a print on the sand, the shifting of a bush or a pile of pebbles. In a man, they did not miss any physical peculiarity and could give as good a spoken portrait in their own fashion as a trained detective. "That man walks with his left shoulder ahead of the right. There is a slight scar below his right eye, and yet another on the other cheek. When he drinks, he swings cup or glass twice before lifting it to his lips."

Nick had known remarkable examples. His friend Richard had died in a temporary camp, among a dozen men. Yet, three months later, in a native café of Little Sacco in Tangier, a bearded Moor had told Nick: "Thou art the man whose friend died on the trail to Bou Bernous."

How often had he amused himself listening to the endless talk of guides around the fire: "To reach Oglet-Hasheem? After passing the ram's head boulder, keep on to the three camel skeletons. Then line a bluff on the right, low in the sky, between your eyes and walk on. You will come to a corpse beneath bushes. You pass by—"

For no one took the trouble of burying the dead, the mummies of men who had died of thirst. Deep in the desert, nothing ever was changed. One could drop an empty gasoline tin by the trail, return and find it unaltered five, ten years after. Baggage was measured, weight precious, and nothing of small value was ever picked up.

No matter how well hidden the German base was, the natives would know of it. Which did not mean that outsiders would be told. What was common gossip in the nomads' tents might never reach a European living nearby. In Mauritania, French officers had been murdered as the result of plots which their native concubines must have been informed of.

"Twelve miles," he repeated. It was

mid-morning, he had been walking several hours. And that ridge ahead was not perceptibly larger than at the start. "I should have brought the canteen along and thrown it away when I finished it."

He knew that he was wrong. Some tracker might have discovered the bottle. There was a key to unlock the tongue of any Saharan: gold. The man might take his find to the nearest French outpost, sell it for a silver coin. And the only stranger reported would be arrested. On a special mission, it is the first suspicion that kills.

By noon, he knew he had to rest. His eyes groped in the glare, rested on a small boulder that threw a shadow just wide enough to shield him. He slumped down, decided to remain there until the heat of midday abated. He was in a sad condition. His lips were cracked and rubbery. His feet pained him, and he saw that they had swollen, that the red flesh puffed and strained between the string bindings.

"Fool's errand," he thought. "I can't make it."

He reacted against discouragement at once. He concentrated his thoughts on his mission. He sought for holes in his story, imagined the questions that might be asked. The Englishman had given him a good outline and he could fill in with details.

"Secondary school at Tripoli," he mused. Closing his eyes, he tried to remember the small port of Syria. He had been there, but he did not know where the school was located. He knew Beyrouth, however, "Hell, doesn't show on the paper. I'll say I went to school in Beyrouth. No one will ask me, anyway. I'm a Maronite Christian, but I couldn't tell much about the cult. They won't ask me that. What did my cousin trade in? Sold general stuff, yes. Exchanged for castor beans and rubber. Suppose they ask me whether you buy castor beans by the peck or by the pound, or how? They won't ask me that either. No, of course they wouldn't ask me anything I can't answer!"

Supposing there was a genuine Syrian present? He could pass as a Syrian to a Frenchman, but what about a Syrian? A Syrian might know the real Boutros, know that he had died on the Gold Coast.

He hugged his knees and dozed off.

HE DID not resume his march until some time after three o'clock. The sun had swung, and now blasted him beneath the left shoulder-blade. But the ridge was perceptibly nearer, he had crept toward it after all. His tongue was hard and dry, rasped against his palate. About this time, in Britain, his former comrades were gathering for a drink.

"Where's Nick?" one would ask.

"Nick? Put in for a special job and went to London. That lad knows how to duck, don't worry."

More likely, no one spoke of him. A new man sat in his place, and those who had known him had forgotten him, as young men at war learn to forget the missing.

"I'm more than halfway to that dump," he grumbled.

His strides were mechanical, he was almost unconscious of pain. He reviewed the peculiar circumstances of his recent life. In 1939, he had changed his name to enlist with the French, as volunteering in a foreign army had been forbidden by the State Department, led to loss of American citizenship rights. He had taken the name of his grandfather—his mother was half-French. Later, as some of the family still lived in the Occupied Zone, he had changed his name to serve in England. Now, he had a fourth name, a very handsome and unusual name, Boutros Abdelnour.

"*Ouqef!*"

His head jerked up sharply, his hands lifted automatically at the command. Not fifty feet up slope, three men were standing outlined against the light, three rifles menaced him. They were Moors, probably Rekebats, big, rangy fellows with very swarthy faces and thick beards. The clean, oiled weapons, the glittering hilts of their knives, contrasted with the poverty and shabbiness of their dress. All three showed solid, white teeth in fierce grins.

"*Al salame alayekum!*" Nick said, politely.

"Who art thou?"

"Boutros Abdelnour," he replied. "One born in Echchem."

"Where didst thou come from?"

He gave his story, briefly, and the three looked at each other.

"A Syrian, a despoiled trader," one said, "who fled from among the Ouled-Delim. He has nothing. Let us kill him and depart."

"He may lie," another hinted.

He laid his rifle on the sand, carefully, and came forward. His hands felt Nick's clothing. He took the knife and left the paper.

"Nothing more. He tells the truth. Shoot."

Nick knew that he was close to death. Raiders killed a man as casually as a rabbit.

"Why waste a cartridge?" another wondered, unsheathing a curved blade. "Are we then grown rich?"

"Why slay me?" Nick asked them.

"Why not?"

"A true man may ask his life spared. I can do you no harm."

"Thou canst speak. And set the people hereabouts on us."

"They do not know me. Would they run into the desert on my word" He appealed to their superstition. "Spare me today that Allah may spare you tomorrow."

"Thou dost speak loudly of Allah, for a Nazarene."

"I'm a *chami,* of your blood if from another land."

The three Moors held a conference. Nick understood them very well. Two were wondering whether he would not prove profitable, if the Spaniards up the coast would not pay ransom. So far as they were concerned, he belonged to the outside world, and outsiders could be sold back often.

"How much would be paid for thee, dog?"

"I know not."

They argued and gesticulated a few minutes longer, the knife was flourished, guns were pointed at his chest. Then one of the three came forward with a camel rope, lashed his wrists tightly behind his back. When this was done and Nick stood helpless, temptation proved too much for his childish cruelty, and he kicked him hard in the groin. Nick slumped down, retching.

"Arise and walk, dog." The tough leather sandal smote him on the buttocks, hurled him on. When he reached the crest, he saw three camels kneeling in the hollow beyond. They had seen him coming from afar and had ambushed him neatly. From each saddle hung a half-full goatskin.

"Give me to drink," he pleaded.

This filled them with indignation. They had spared his life, which they had every right to take, and now he asked for their precious water! They set upon him savagely, beating him with fists and feet. Nick saw, understood that their fury was caused by a recent disappointment. They had come far, had been frustrated in some undertaking, and he was proving a poor consolation prize, save for his ability to suffer pain.

AT LAST, they hoisted him erect, bruised and bleeding, took him along to the camels. They mounted and urged him forward. He had to proceed at a rapid trot, ahead of the long-legged animals. When he faltered, they struck him with knotted ropes.

As they rode, they exchanged a few sentences. One remained doubtful. Sooner or later, they would have to share their water with him, to keep him alive. One would have to keep awake to watch him. Was he worth the trouble? Would the Spaniards pay money for such a specimen? And could he last for days, until they reached an outpost?

"I tell thee, Jeloon, he's a Nazarene. It is their law to buy their own kind from us."

"Their own kind, truly. He is no Spaniard. He's a mangy *chami.*"

"Maybe the French would buy him. They rule Echchem."

"No longer. The English are masters there. Thou wert conceived a fool and the years mended nothing, Jeloon. We want nothing to do with the French. They would buy him, perhaps, but their black soldiers would follow our tracks and slay us."

"They paid dearly for some of their

kind in the past and harmed no one."

"Many years ago. And the men bought were important, men who guided the flying machines. Now, the French have little money. They were raided and despoiled by the *Bruss* people in their own country."

Even here, all knew that the Prussians, the *Bruss* people, had vanquished France. Nick stumbled on, knowing he would not escape from the trio. They were Saharans and they had mounts. How long their patience would last was the problem. It might take weeks to reach a spot where an exchange could be arranged with the Spaniards.

He thought of telling them about the rifle, the cartridges, the gold and the silk of the parachute. That would be a large ransom for a man of his small importance. But he knew that having made a profit, they would shoot him the sooner. Pity and compassion had been sweated out of Saharans many centuries ago.

He ran on with bursting lungs. He must drop soon.

And all this happened because of a slight error in calculation, because he had jumped too late or had received the signal too late. Perhaps, no human agency was to blame and a gust of wind had spun him miles away from the spot selected for his landing. He would stumble and fall before very long; one of the Moors would dismount and cut his throat. In a week or ten days, Sir Andrew would realize that he had failed and another man would be dropped.

Twilight was approaching. The shadows lengthened, violet and purple against the tawny and gold dunes. Very soon, they would have to halt, until the moon rose. Then they would drink, and they might grant him a few mouthfuls. At that moment, that hope was stronger than the hope of freedom.

At last, across a flat stretch, a narrow gully opened between two piles of sand. As before, Jeloon urged his camel ahead, the other two hung back. The Moor had unslung his rifle, leaned forward against the pommel of the saddle. His animal came to a full stop, and he rose higher, craning his neck, moving his eyes from side to side.

He settled back, lifted his hand. Then, slowly, he slid down the flank of his beast, struck the sand on his feet, took two steps, knelt and dropped on his face. Muffled, echoing, a report thudded in the distance. Immediately, sparks flickered along the crests, a dozen rifles were in action. Nick threw himself headlong.

Jeloon's mount came running back, throwing its legs out in the long, ridiculous strides that eat up distance so rapidly. One of the other Moors galloped toward it, drove it ahead. The other, less courageous or less greedy, was already some distance away. The two animals sped by, a few feet from Nick. He turned his head, looked up at the rider.

The man no longer thought of him, was crazed with the lust to escape. His mouth was wide open in a scream, the beard whipped back.

"Make haste, Mahoud! Make haste!"

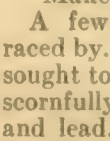
A few minutes later, other camels raced by. Carbines cracked, as the riders sought to shoot on the wing. Nick smiled scornfully—they were wasting powder and lead. Then he settled down, comfortably, upon the hard-packed sand and had a nap. For the moment, he no longer cared whether he awoke or not.

Then he felt himself lifted, the nuzzle of a skin was pressed to his lips. He saw a circle of gaunt, nude shins, white cloaks, turbaned heads.

"By Allah," said a voice. "Their captive was a *roumi!*"

## CHAPTER III

### DESERT RENDEZVOUS



THIRST awoke Nick again. For many minutes he remained as in a stupor, barely aware of his identity, struggling for full consciousness. The darkness was absolute.

He remembered that he was in Mauritania, some sixty miles from the sea. That he had been captured and tormented, then that men had lifted him and given him water. From then on, he was sure of nothing.

He was stretched out on a yielding, rough surface, somewhat like felt. Probably coarse camel's hair blankets. Beyond that, his groping fingers encoun-

tered earth. Not sand, earth, very smooth, without stones, pebbles or twigs, so that he was not in a tent. Sure enough, his palm came against a wall of dry brick.

So far, so good. He was in a house, he must be in a permanent settlement. The Moors here, consequently, were in relations with the French, hence would not kill him. He remembered very clearly that someone had said he was a *roumi*, a Roman, meaning a European. He was a guest, not a prisoner.

Meanwhile, he had become aware of several things. There were lively, hungry insects on his couch, the cold announced the end of the night, and there was something definitely wrong with his feet. They pained and felt very heavy. His nose, cheeks and brows, lips and jaws, were sore. His beard was matted with some flaky substance which he knew very soon was dried blood.

"The slobs gave me a nice going-over," he thought.

He was worried about his feet. He sat up and groped. At first, he laughed with immense relief. They were shackled, that was all.

They were fastened together with an iron implement consisting of two massive anklets connected by two iron rods, each one eight or nine inches in length, linked by a ring in the middle. He had seen such an apparatus used on native prisoners in Morocco. It permitted walking, but gave the wearer a most comical gait, a shuffling-hopping motion. He had never imagined he would wear one. A thinner chain passed through the center ring and was no doubt fastened to a staple in the wall.

His first amusement did not last long. This meant that he was still a prisoner, that he had only changed masters, and that his mission was as compromised as before. Thirst reasserted itself, tormented him. He knew that making a disturbance might lead to a few kicks, but he might get a little water.

"In the name of Allah, in the name of Allah—"

Rusty hinges creaked three minutes later, and Nick knew that someone was in the room.

"Why dost thou yell so in the night?"

"Thirsty. Water."

"There is water in a crock near thee."

This proved the truth. Nick took long, satisfying swallows. The fluid was brackish and gritty, but it was not at all bad for the region.

"Hungry?"

"No. Thirsty, so thirsty."

"It's nothing. The fever. Those jackals had almost killed thee."

"Indeed they had. They beat me like a nagging wife."

"If thou dost need anything else, O Abdelnour, let the call be in a low voice. I am on watch and not at all deaf."

"Thou dost know my name?"

"Our *cadi* read it on the paper."

"True. Why am I shackled?"

"So that we may be sure to find thee in the morning."

"Why would I leave?" Nick wondered.

"We know not. But men sometimes leave."

THE guard's voice was near; Nick knew that he had squatted down by his couch, that he intended to stay. There came a series of tiny noises, sparks flew. The guard was lighting a pipe with flint and steel. The smell of his tobacco was somewhat nauseating to the prisoner, but he endured it. His mind was functioning almost normally, he remembered that people said more in a casual chat than in answer to questions.

"Yes, indeed, men sometimes leave," the Moor resumed. He told two anecdotes to prove his point. Then he cleared his throat, spat, changed the subject. "We slew all three of the Rekebats."

"All three? I saw one fall, that is all."

"All three, I said. Yes, in truth, they had been doomed for four days, for our ire was high and we were as a lioness seeking her cubs. Yes, yes, it is a story that will be told many times for many years. Seest thou, the Rekebats came down from their country, nine of them with nine fast camels and three lesser beasts for baggage. They came to take a maid named Zahra, whose beauty was known throughout the universe. Ah yes, hers was the rump of a filly, hers were the legs of a gazelle!"

Nick reached for the crock and drank.

The picture created by the Moor was amusing, but he spoke in all seriousness, proud of his style, of his diction. An old man, by his voice, and garrulous.

"They surprised the tents. Three men they killed, and then fled with the booty, several camels, Zahra, an older woman and that woman's small daughter. Then they fled north. But a small boy had escaped and came here to warn us. Our *cadi* sent a rider to the French post near here, who spoke to another French post with his *bla selk,* and the camel soldiers in the north raced to bar the way."

Nick made a mental note: *bla selk,* wireless, radio.

"The soldiers fought the Rekebats. Four they slew, two they captured, and those did not live long. For the man who had wanted Zahra had cut her throat. The woman was freed, but her child died. The three Rekebats who escaped came south again, and we were told. You saw the one die, the others ran where we wanted them to run. We had good shots in ambush and they were slain."

"Your people are good fighters!"

"Yes. Rekebats, Treknas, they scorn us who sometimes live in houses, say we are fat men, traders, cowards. Yet some of us can shoot. I myself, when I was a young man, have fought. I was in Morocco with Ma-el-Ayeen—"

"Then thou dost know war!"

This led to a long, rambling narration of the heartbreaking march of the Mauritanian "blue men" across the Sahara into Morocco, of the storming of Marrakesh, the massacre of Christians and Jews, the evacuation and retreat before Mangin's counter-attack. The old fellow guided Nick's hand to a deep hole in his thigh, where a bullet had struck.

"What is the name of this place?"

"Dar Rokba for some people, Bir Rehim to others." The guard listed four or five other names. Most Saharan places have several names, for each tribe likes to use its own words. "The French call it Repoux."

Nick started. Repoux was the map indication for the settlement where he was to meet Sir Andrew's agent.

"*Ya,* I've heard of it. The French keep soldiers here."

"Not so. Until five, six years ago, yes. Now, no."

"Ah. But they have a Government man here still?"

"No. There is a place where the automobiles stopped when automobiles came here. This place. And a man to watch the place, who is called Mahoud ben Takoul and is also scribe for the *cadi.*"

Mahoud ben Takoul—that was the name given Nick. He had reached his destination after all. And he had obtained his information without arousing the slightest suspicion. For the old man talked on for a while, yawned, stretched and left.

Nick felt that all was going well. His being a prisoner now was a detail. That would be settled easily. Mahoud ben Takoul was a native Saharan, therefore "in the know." The problem would be to obtain full collaboration. The Moor might have his own reasons to keep silent.

WHEN dawn came, he stared around the room, which he had somehow imagined much more spacious. It was perhaps twelve feet in length and eight in width, windowless, closed with a heavy, iron-clamped wooden door.

After a while, the door opened, and the guard came in. As Nick had expected, he was old, stooped, and a long white beard hung down his chest. He refilled the prisoner's crock, set the kerosene tin outside, reappeared with a great wooden bowl piled with *couscous.* Nick wiped his fingers on his rags, started to eat. The millet was badly cooked, lumpy, and the chunks of goat meat as elastic as rubber. But it was his first solid food in more than thirty hours, and he emptied the container.

"Fed?" the old man asked.

"Well fed. Praise Allah."

The old chap then produced from his waist-band a sort of cast-iron hook which turned out to be the key to the chain-fastening in the wall. Nick stood up, gathered the length of loose chain in his hand, as he had seen prisoners do so often.

"Come along. The *cadi* will speak to thee."

They emerged into the sunlight briefly, to circle the cube of masonry in which Nick had spent the night, and enter another room, somewhat larger, on the opposite side. His progress did not go unnoticed. Twenty or thirty brats, most of them stark naked, greeted his appearance with glee, and all the dogs in the settlement appeared to have held a convention, barking, yelping, snarling.

A skinny old Moor—he looked as if the wind would blow him away—sat on cushions in a corner of the room. His closely set black eyes, his hooked nose, the crinkled flesh, made him resemble a white-bearded parrot. He peered at Nick suspiciously, hiccuped, belched, snuffled.

"On thee salvation, *Cadi,*" Nick said.

"On thee salvation."

There was a long silence, an exchange of glances. On the notable's right stood a tall Moor, clad in a blue cloak, a short European military saber hanging from a shoulder-belt. In contrast with the prevailing local style, this fellow shaved his chin, but preserved a magnificent set of black handlebar mustaches. He resembled a Turkish warrior in an old engraving. The venerable chieftain lifted a veined hand, and the blue-garbed man spoke.

"Thy name?"

"Boutros Abdelnour."

"Why wert thou with our foes?"

Nick related his story, in the proper tones, with the right gestures. He did not have to worry about his accent—he had learned Arabic first in Beyrouth, as a small boy, and his instinctive pronunciation was that of the region. Occasionally, the blue man would translate one of his expressions into the local dialect.

"How long wert thou a captive of the Ouled-Delim?"

"Many months. With them I went to Cisneros, where they sought a ransom for me from the Spaniards. They did not get it. They then took me to Port-Etienne, but did not permit me to go too near. The French there would not pay unless I was brought in. They knew I came from Senegal, so they sent me with three men to be ransomed there. Two days ago, knowing we were passing near here, I escaped. And before they could catch me again, or before I could get here, the Rekebats captured me. The Ouled-Delims were seen in the distance, but they no doubt recognized my new masters, and feared to come near. I ran all day ahead of their camels, till I thought I would die. Then your warriors came. I am a French subject, and I ask that the shackles be removed."

"Tell him, Mahoud," the old chief said wearily.

"Thou dost speak French?" Mahoud asked. He continued in that language. "We have been ordered by the colonel commanding the territory to arrest and hold all isolated strangers of doubtful origin, and to inform the French authorities."

"My origin is not doubtful, *monsieur,*" Nick protested volubly. "I'm a Syrian, born at Damascus. A French subject, therefore. I hold you and your chief responsible for mistreatment." He hesitated and concluded: "From now on."

"It is for us to decide what is doubtful, not for you."

"I demand to be taken to the French at once."

"That will be done."

"I have suffered on the road of pilgrimage," Nick resumed, again using Arabic. He looked at Mahoud as he spoke.

"Those who seek knowledge must learn to suffer," the man agreed.

There was not a tremor of his mustaches, not a quiver of the yellow flesh of his face as he spoke. Nevertheless, his reply showed that he had understood and that he now knew Nick's purpose. It was almost unbelievable, but the first contact had been established!

"When will I be free?"

"Very soon. If you told the truth."

"I am a Syrian, a French subject, born at Damascus—"

"We have heard thee with patience," the old man declared. "Now, bear thy lot in patience. We grant thee food, water, shelter and protection. Allah and the French alone can free thee. Go."

NICK had not been long in his cell when Mahoud entered. He had a couple of tins in his hands, one of asparagus, one of peas, and several disks of native bread.

He opened the cans with a knife, clumsily, at great risk to his fingers.

"There is little here you'd like," he said. He squatted near, was silent until Nick was through eating. "The old man is asleep, and does not understand French. We can talk."

"Let's talk," Nick agreed.

"Word has been sent that you have arrived. In six hours, they shall know it, at the place where you know they wait for news."

"That is good. What is your information on the matter?"

"No more than what I have given already." Mahoud shrugged. "I hear this and I hear that, but of myself, I know nothing." He hesitated, cleared his throat. "You came down by parachute?"

"How else would I come?"

"There are ways. What did you do with the parachute?"

"I buried it."

"There is nothing else?"

"Yes, a rifle, cartridges and a water-bottle."

"No money?" And as Nick was silent, he added: "We can do nothing without money. Men and camels must be hired. And part of it was for me. Weren't you told?"

"Yes." Nick smiled. The French long have had an excellent name for that powerful British weapon, the pound sterling: St. George's Cavalry. "The money is there also."

"Tell me where. I have a trusted lad I shall send. Even if the wind has been strong, he can find your tracks."

"He will not steal?"

"No more than I will steal," Mahoud said simply. "If one eats the whole hen, there come no more eggs."

"Yes, such is truth."

"Had you arrived quietly, as expected, I could perhaps have avoided taking you before the French captain. But too many men saw you. It must be done. It is good after all, because it does not seem that you were seeking this place in particular. Chance served us well. But beware of the captain. He speaks very gently and he seems like a simple man. Yet what he wants to learn he learns, oftener than otherwise." Mahoud lifted his hands. "That which you are seeking to learn, I am certain he knows.

The interpreter hesitated, then evidently yielded to liking for Nick. He produced from his sack-like pocket inside his cloak a package of American cigarettes, unopened. He tore the paper carefully, handed one to Nick, as local courtesy ordained, lighted a match.

"Comfortable, eh?" he asked with a pleased grin.

"Yes, except for the bugs."

"All Europeans complain about them," Mahoud admitted. "We tried to keep them away, when we had many travelers. But it is no use. In one day, two days, they have found the path from the tents here. They are bad, and the shackles too are bad. But when there is nothing to be done, one endures."

"I've got to keep these on?"

"Yes. The *cadi* really doesn't like you Europeans. He is glad to put chains and irons on you. It's a joke, you know, a good joke, for him to send a European one of his kind in chains, and upon his own orders." He produced a printed sheet, bearing the heading of the French State. "You see, it is clear: 'Suspicious strangers must be carefully guarded.'"

"Why the order?"

"I think it was written because the French think spies might be sent into this region," Mahoud stated, without a smile. "They know that the English are informed very soon of changes in patrols."

"How far is the French post?"

"It is not really a post. It is a pasture camp for the camels. It is twenty-two kilometers. On good camels, such as I shall secure for us, that means four hours. Now, so that I may leave word to my tracker, where is the hiding place? When you faced north, how far to your right was the ridge?"

Nick gave the directions, described the pattern of stones he had made. A European could have done little with his information, but it was very clear to a Saharan.

"That is good. The man will start out as we leave. And he will surely be back when we return. Undoubtedly, the captain will ask you to remain with him. And you cannot refuse to spend the first night."

"What reason can I give for returning here instead of asking to be sent to St. Louis?"

"There will be no caravan leaving for more than a fortnight. You must say that there is possible trading for you in this place—that you may wish to return on business and desire to become acquainted with the region. You must also prepare for the trips we shall have to take by saying you intend to join a party of hunters. Say it is for the sport of it, then he will be sure you have some business reason. He will think we have told you of the mad Frenchmen who came here for a while, deluded by a belief there was gold in the rocky stretches. Such a tale brought many Frenchmen, ten or twelve, in 1923 and again in 1937. Several died of the heat and thirst. The others found no gold. But the talk persists."

"What is the name of the rocky stretch?"

"Kern el Nhas."

"You think—"

"What we seek is there or in Spanish Territory. If we have to go into Rio de Oro, it will be very dangerous and will take several weeks." The Moor paused, then asked: "Is there a reward, a special compensation?"

Nick had not been told anything of this. But he thought that he could promise without danger. "Oh yes, probably a large reward."

"One hundred sovereigns over expenses?"

"At the very least."

"Gold value?"

"Surely."

"Good."

## CHAPTER IV

### A TOAST TO FREEDOM

NICK left in state during the morning. He was escorted by Mahoud, who toted a modern cavalry carbine, and by four guards armed with old Gras rifles and bayonets. The chain of his leg-irons was passed around the neck of his camel, securely locked. The venerable *cadi* then warned him in a sullen voice that if he tried to escape he would surely be shot.

When they had trotted fifty yards, Mahoud grinned.

"He wants you to tell the French officer how stern and tough he is. He likes to be important, but everyone knows I really run the village. I speak French."

"And excellent French, old man."

"Yes. I was an interpreter for the air line. Flew with the pilots to keep them from being massacred if they had a forced landing in the desert. Before that, I lived in France. Where? Oh, everywhere. Marseilles, Paris, Toulouse, Dieppe. I sold rugs and curios."

"When the war is over and you have money, you'll go back?"

"Never," Mahoud said, with some bitterness.

"You like it out here better?"

"I was born here. Each man loves his own home." Mahoud shrugged. "And then, in France, one is always being put in jail. For anything and everything. For not having a paper saying you can peddle in the streets. For sleeping in a park on a hot night. For beating a woman who cheats you out of money. For so much as showing a knife to a man who insults you and threatens to kick you. The jail would be bearable, for they feed you and seldom make you work hard. But all you earn goes into the paying of fines."

Nick laughed.

"You are freer here, eh?"

"Oh, yes." Mahoud grinned. "If one of my women talks back, I can beat her and all say that I am a worthy man. If anyone insults me and he is killed in the desert soon after, there is no fuss."

The camels trotted on rapidly. The rolling plain under the downpouring light was identical with sections of the Draa Plateau. Nick could have believed himself six years younger. But conditions had changed, he was going to meet a French officer not as a friend but as an adversary. He had for an ally Mahoud, who was neither a patriot nor an idealist but an out-and-out paid agent. That the Moor would have slit Nick's throat for the proper sum of money, there was not the least doubt.

By mid-afternoon, the French encampment was in sight, conical native

tents surrounding a larger shelter of the type known in the French service as a *marabout* tent. A Senegalese private, clad in a loin cloth and a scarlet skull-cap, but wearing cartridge-pouches and bayonet harness on his bare hide, halted them, identified Mahoud and waved them on.

Other negro soldiers appeared. These were the Mauritanian policemen and not the conscripts seen in colonial regiments. Nick had seldom seen such fine physical specimens. The desert had melted all superfluous flesh from their frames, they were lean as hounds, muscular as cougars.

The six camels knelt some distance from the main tent. An officer appeared, wearing the baggy trousers known as *serwal* and a sort of a Russian blouse across the breast of which the three stripes of captain had been stitched. A light brown beard framed his tanned face and his eyes shone very blue in the shadow of the helmet's brim.

"Greetings, Mahoud," he started in Arabic. "What hast thou here?"

"A guest and not a prisoner, Captain," Mahoud replied in French. "The old man insisted on keeping him chained."

"Why not? Can't be too careful with such birds—"

"I'm a Syrian, a businessman. Boutros Abdelnour is my name."

"Oho-ho! You speak French, do you?"

"I'm a businessman, Captain — I was—"

"I'm Captain Merlet. See here, you're safe now. I'm sorry you were mishandled. As soon as you're rid of those ridiculous things, we shall have a drink. Perhaps not of your own *raki*, but something that can be drunk. You seem to have gone through a pretty hard time."

"Don't remind me of it, Captain!" Nick gestured and his voice rang with a plaintive tone. "Starving, beaten, humiliated, chained—"

"Well, well! You're all right now, my friend." Merlet walked aside with Mahoud and the interpreter spoke rapidly, the officer nodding, asking a question occasionally. By the time Nick was freed and trying out his legs in stiff strides, he was returning, smiling. "Come in, come in."

THE interior of the tent was spacious. There was a cot on one side, several army trunks on the other, stenciled with names and numbers, a folding table, folding chairs. Merlet prepared the drinks with his own hands, in tall glasses. Three fingers' breadth of anisette, a dash of fluid from a smaller bottle, cool water from the clay *gargoulette* suspended from the pole before the open flap.

"Your health and freedom, M. Abdelnour."

"Your health and my thanks, Captain."

Nick related the misfortunes of Boutros Abdelnour very well. He gave the names of the Ouled-Delim families in the camp, used the Saharan words for saddles, tents, coffers, pots, like a man who has become used to them. With a gesture that he should keep on talking, Merlet went to a trunk, brought back a filing-box, looked through it.

"Your disappearance was not reported."

"Of course not!" Nick gesticulated widely. "No one to report it. After we sold out in Casamance, my cousin went home for a vacation. And you know what happened in Syria. I needed his signature to use our joint account, and the mails were stopped. I thought I would take the time to investigate trading in Mauritania. You know what commercial rivalry can be—I was afraid the established traders, even those of my race, would put in my way obstacles of various sorts. So I kept my trip secret."

Merlet sipped his drink, and squinted at the identification booklet through the smoke of his cigarette. "Yes, yes. Moreover, the official service that keeps track of travelers did not run very well for a while. In normal times, the last officer you met would surely have made sure that you had been heard from."

Nick grew tense, for this was the first dangerous spot. His host was about to ask for the name of the officer, that of the last French outpost he had been in. He had such information to give, but if Merlet knew the other personally, things might grow embarrassing. But the captain simply closed the booklet, after writing a few words on a page and

stamping a seal across his signature.

"Before doing anything else, clean up. It will help your morale. Get rid of that beard—I note you were not wearing one. I can lend you razors, there is plenty of soap and water. You cannot wear my clothes, too tall. But I can give you issue garments."

"I haven't a *sou*, Captain."

"Come, come, I do not run a store. And I don't mind stealing a bit of Government property in a good cause. If it worries you, you can send something later, for my platoon's sinking fund."

"I'll do that, Captain."

Facing a mirror, Nick knew why he had been accepted. His eyes stared feverishly out of a face streaked with blue and livid marks, skin was shredding from his cheeks, the thickened lips made a purple ridge in the matted beard. He hesitated to shave off that beard, but the officer had suggested it, and to disregard the suggestion might start suspicion. However, he preserved a mustache.

Outside, in a sort of canvas lean-to, a negro orderly sluiced him with buckets of water. He ran a comb through his wet hair, parting it in the middle. Then he slipped into the khaki slacks and the shirt given to him, laced on solid, new military boots. The result pleased his vanity, but was somewhat disturbing. He looked far more like an officer than a trader. However, the uniform accounted for that.

"Served in the army?" was Merlet's first remark.

"Four months. Although born in Damascus, my family's from Beyrouth, so I was in the Libanese *Chasseurs*. I developed slight heart-trouble and was discharged in advance of my time."

"What do you think of the war?"

"I'm afraid I haven't kept up with events, Captain."

"I am allowed no personal opinions. But there are no orders against hope. I can tell you truly, M. Abdelnour, that I hope what every other true Frenchman hopes with all his heart. And what every Syrian must hope also."

"True, Captain. There is only one hope for us."

"What do you intend to do?"

They discussed Boutros' immediate future. The captain agreed that it might be wise to take this opportunity to study the region.

"But I must say you don't lack nerve. To risk further adventures after what you've been through!"

"Bah, this time I shall be with Mahoud and a party of hunters. He's going to the hills for meat."

"And you think you will be safe with Mahoud?" Merlet smiled.

"Why not?"

"Mahoud is as fine a brigand as ever drew breath. An intelligent fellow, a kind-hearted man and a loyal enough friend, but also a crook. In other words, a Saharan Moor."

NICK threw his head back to laugh at ease.

"Come, Captain, what profit would there be for him in killing me? I have nothing. On the other hand, I have promised to send him pay for his services."

"Well, I shall tell him that he had better return with you. However, he probably knows that these days I could not even go out there with a detachment to find out what became of you."

"Why not, Captain?"

Merlet held Nick's eyes for several seconds before speaking.

"I suppose I can trust you not to repeat this. For some reason or other, I have received strict orders not to dispatch patrols in the direction of the Kern el Nhas. These orders sent me by Territorial Headquarters were relayed by Dakar, from Vichy. So that that entire zone is No Man's Land for an indefinite duration."

"Why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. *Perhaps better.*"

For a long minute, Nick looked at Merlet. He did not need to be told that the officer had stretched a point in his favor, that the orders were confidential. And he was not speaking to avoid a casual trader, a vague danger. Merelet suspected him and was taking this way of letting him know it.

"Why do you confide in me, Captain?"

"Because I expect to keep you here for dinner, monsieur, and discussing busi-

ness while at the table leads to indigestion. Also, you inspire me with an extraordinary sympathy and much admiration.

"I'm flattered, Captain." Nick laughed, in the same bantering tone. "But exactly why?"

"Because you're phenomenal, that's why."

"Phenomenal? How?"

"You defy the laws of nature."

"In what fashion?"

"Your hair, for instance. It is quite long, but it grows as evenly in the back after months of neglect as if a skilled European barber had trimmed it within the last six weeks. Good barbers are so rare in the Sahara. See the steps and stairs left by mine."

"I see them."

"Also, you must possess a remarkable constitution. You have been living on native foods, drinking well water, for the best part of a year. Yet your teeth are very white, strong, your gums are as healthy as mine, who have had vegetables, lemon juice, anti-scorbutic drops. Have you ever seen the gums of a European who has spent months on a native diet?"

"I have, yes."

"Then you know you are exceptional."

"A matter of luck, Captain."

"Admitted. And you have such astonishing power of adaptation. For instance, when I go on leave after a long sojourn in the desert, the change from *nayels* to boots is a torture. I take off my shoes in restaurants! My toes need air! Freedom! You haven't worn shoes for months, long months. Yet you put on the pair I supplied you with, lace them up *and keep them on.*"

Nick thought that the captain's blue eyes resembled more and more the steel rims of rifle muzzles. He, Nick, would be sent down to Dakar, his identification booklet would be checked against the files. He was not merely a British agent, he was a member of a mutinous army of Frenchmen.

"And so—what, Captain?"

"So, I admire you. I compliment you for all that. And tonight, I invite you to dinner. What the devil more can I do for you?"

ON THE sixth day after leaving the deck of the British cruiser, Nick rode into the first shallow gully of the Kern el Nhas. The amphibian scheduled to pick him up was due over the appointed place towards dawn of the tenth night. The spot was two days away by camel. So that he knew that he would have to find out something inside forty-eight hours.

If he failed the first meeting, the machine would come again five nights later. It had been judged unwise for the cruiser to remain long near the coast, for the plane to soar over the same zone several nights in succession.

There had been no open conversation between Nick and Captain Merlet. There was small doubt that the officer knew his guest to be a British agent and had a very good idea of how he had arrived. But Merlet, whose father had been killed in Champagne in 1915, whose brother had fallen while covering the British evacuation of Dunkirk, was anti-German and anti-Vichy.

It was most probable that he knew that Mahoud was drawing pay from an alien government. And it was probable, also, that the majority of French officers and soldiers in the region shared Merlet's attitude. For the captain had reported the presence of Abdelnour to the central military post at Atar, and although there was a general order to investigate all strangers thoroughly, headquarters had accepted Merlet's statement without comment.

"You'll see," the Frenchman had explained to Nick. "If that routine message is heard at Dakar by some officious clerk, the German Armistice Commissioners will prevail on us to hold you. But they'd better hurry. If the order comes after you leave here, I'll insist on written instructions to disregard the general order against patrols in that direction."

Nick and his guards, now his companions, returned to Repoux during the following morning. As Mahoud had predicted, the old *cadi* was all kindness and light. The tracker had located Nick's cache and brought back the stuff. The interpreter kept all the money.

"You're known to have had nothing

when you came," he pointed out to Nick, "and it would look odd if you dropped coins. While I am known to be prosperous." As Nick had passed the inspection of the French, he was free to move as he pleased, and had moved into a tent close to Mahoud's camp, three conical brown shelters.

He met El Mtayeb, the man who had gone to find the parachute. The fellow, who was, Mahoud swore, the finest tracker in the region, was simple-minded, almost an idiot. His expression justified his name, "The Amazed." His eyes were dull, his mouth hung open, he had a number of maniacal tics. He stammered, and before managing to utter certain words, had to duck his head jerkily, as if he snapped them out of his memory. He wore no turban, no head-covering of any sort. His hair puffed around his skull like an astrakhan cap, thick and kinky.

But this fool, who would have been locked up in a civilized community, held an extraordinary communion with the land. He could follow, it was claimed, the tracks of a barefooted man on stone, after two days and a sand storm. Up to four hundred yards, El Mtayeb dropped anything he shot at. At Mahoud's request, he demonstrated by shooting a scavenger on the wing. And it was Nick's mouth that sagged when he saw that jerky shoulder turn to stone, a look of keen interest flash in the open pupil.

El Mtayeb had a way with camels, evidently held telepathic communications with the surly beasts. The most vicious of the animals, who had to be muzzled with a cord net, would nibble playfully at his ears and at his buttocks when he was near.

He had no maps and no compass, he never consulted the sky. Somewhere in his warped brain was a director.

"Lead us to Kern el Nhas, El Mtayeb," Mahoud said.

"K-k-k-errn elna elna el Nhassss—gooo-go-good!"

The fool confided in his beast, a lanky, mangy-looking caricature of a camel, which he had named *oukil*, the lawyer. Then he leaped into the saddle, and was off.

"He knows?" Nick asked Mahoud.

"Yes. And any spot between the river Senegal and the Iguidi Dunes he will find like a swallow."

"Perhaps he knows something of what we seek?"

"Doubtless he does know. He has hunted wild sheep there lately. But, alas, El Mtayeb cannot answer questions. He just finds places and follows orders. He cannot think—" Mahoud indicated the British rifle hanging from Nick's saddle. "He had never seen such a gun, he told me, and wanted to try it. He said it did not work. I looked. You know, there were the maps rolled tightly, in the barrel. His mind could not think of removing them."

## CHAPTER V

### ONE SMALL MISTAKE

THE Kern el Nhas appeared on those maps as a series of fine brown ridges, like an outspread palm with its mounds and lines. It was a great mass of sandstone lifting up from the sandy desert, slashed through, from northeast to southwest, by very deep ravines and gullies. Its center was more than one hundred kilometers from the sea, two days to four days by camel but less than fifteen minutes in a fast plane. Aviation and the automobile have confused the notion of distance in the Sahara. Days may collapse into minutes, weeks become hours, merely with a change in locomotion.

This forsaken heap of rocks had inhabitants. The first camp Nick reached consisted of four tents. A few meager date-palms, shrunken acacia gum-trees, faded dusty bushes sank optimistic roots into the arid soil. Thin sheep, who seemed ashamed of their surroundings, wandered dispiritedly about.

The male inhabitants were the most primitive that Nick had seen. Tall, gaunt, leathery chaps in blue robes, their skins smudged by the poor dye, strutted around, bearded and hairy as the prophets of old. Children swarmed, and evidently it was an affectation for a child of either sex to wear anything until the early teens were reached. The young

girls and women, in contrast, were singularly beautiful, flashing black eyes, raven tresses, superb, rounded, graceful limbs. But when old age came to them, some time between twenty and twenty-five, the desert reasserted itself pitilessly. From a brown, gypsy-like beauty, the woman became a hag, wrinkled, sagging, only the eyes remaining unchanged, gleaming in those harpies' masks like diamonds on a miser's palm.

The only firearms in sight were old shotguns, some of them flintlocks, mended with brass tacks and leather strips. That each man had a rapid-fire modern rifle hidden somewhere was not in doubt. But Mahoud was known to be in Government Service, and the Government did not approve of long-range weapons that could bring down its officers at four hundred yards.

"We'll ask them if they've noticed anything," Nick said.

They answered as he had expected. A Saharan will not answer the questions of an outsider truthfully. In his presumed character as a trader, he was called to look over a lot of hides. He had forgotten the elementary distinctions between sheep, goat and wild sheep. It was Mahoud who looked and felt and sniffed, and who also turned out to have some knowledge of gum. Nick left him to discuss business with the males and strolled down the dry bed of the torrent.

As he had expected, the children followed. Before long, laziness overcame curiosity and only three boys remained, one already wearing a cloth, the others naked imps of ten or eleven. They were curious about Nick's rifle, which was of a model they had never seen.

They admired the mechanism, the breech, fired questions. How many times would it shoot? How fast?

They were not impressed. One of the smaller boys indicated the distant peak of the stone mass and said something to the effect that up there someone had a weapon that would shoot many times, as fast as this: "Tackatackatackatacka!"

His imitation was excellent, and Nick identified an automatic rifle or a light machine gun. He felt a definite elation. A native could not own such a weapon, and even if he did, he would not waste cartridges. Ammunition is vital and scarce in the desert. Then he made a slight mistake. Instead of listening, he asked a question.

"Didst thou see the man?"

"No. I only heard. It was Akli who saw—"

The little chap broke off, staggered, blood oozed from his forehead. The bigger boy had stopped him by throwing a stone. Indignant, Nick started after the young brute, but the average Saharan could out-sprint most Olympic runners. He lifted the rifle. The attack had been so harsh that he was tempted to scare the fellow with a shot. A sharp impact on his shoulder, another on his leg, made him turn.

The nude kids were pelting him to cover their comrade's retreat. Even the one with the bleeding bruise. These people took things literally and the lads thought a pal in danger of death. Nick started to laugh and swung the gun in their direction. They scrambled in the tumble of rocks and boulders, crawled to cover.

Nick retraced his steps slowly, thinking.

The attack had not been caused by the mere wish to keep information from a stranger. Nick now understood that the larger boy had come along to watch the younger and recalled now that he had gestured to them to keep quiet several times. He had not thrown that stone at the risk of injuring the other and starting a family feud. No, he was certain that he would be approved by the grown men. Consequently, the camp as a whole was in danger of losing some advantage if outsiders were given information.

What could that advantage be?

Another thing that he noted, when he set himself to observe, was that the men present were old, crippled, sickly. And that the whole herd of camels consisted of but six animals. The vigorous men were away somewhere, with the good animals. It might be interesting to know where. He joined Mahoud in the tent erected for them; they had hot tea, smoked. Then Nick unrolled the large-scale map covering the Kern el Nhas region, placed stones at the corners of the sheet to prevent its curling.

"THE planes are somewhere around here," Nick said. "I know there are strangers with machine guns about. In one of those ravines—but which one?"

"Not these," Mahoud declared, tracing markings with a finger. "There must be room for three planes to leave or return at one time. You, who know such things, how much room would be needed?"

Nick made a vague reply. His heart had started to pound in his throat. He

*"Listen carefully and do not move. The rifle is pointed at your face and I have my finger on the trigger."*

cast a look over his shoulder. No one could see into the tent, the row of saddles was in the way. The interpreter was as yet unaware of his slip: *three planes*. Nick reached back for the rifle, inched it forward, braced the muzzle on his left hand. The Moor was squatted on his heels, looking at the map, talking.

"Mahoud!"

"M. Boutros?"

"Listen carefully and do not move. The rifle is pointed at your face and I have my finger on the trigger. You would surely be killed or blinded."

Mahoud looked from Nick to the rifle and back again.

"Why?"

"You have just said 'three planes.'"

"What is wrong with my saying that?"

"How do you know there are three, not two, or four, or five?"

"Ah, yes. What made me say that?" Mahoud frowned in concentration. But he had a wary eye. "Well, a plane is a mount, like a camel. A man with three camels would keep two for use and place the third out to pasture. Thus did I—"

"Do not move, Mahoud! I want the truth. If you do not answer honestly, I swear by Allah I'll press the trigger. You shall be dead. It will have been an accident, and I'll promise the price of blood to your people. And that will be settled."

"What do you want to know?"

"All."

"About the Boches?"

"Yes."

"I know nothing save that they are somewhere near and that they have one large plane and two smaller." Mahoud reflected. "There may be more, but those were seen."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Who brought you to Kern el Nhas? Mahoud. Why tell words, when words are useless? On another occasion, another man came as you come, and he chided me, saying that I was not paid to repeat all the foolish prattle of the Sahara, but to report on things I had seen with my own eyes. Had I told you an Ouled bou Sba cameleer told me this and that, you would have said: 'Idle gossip. Show me.'"

"But you should have informed the—those who pay you—"

"The French or the English?"

"The English, you fool."

"I did tell them. Else would you be here? I said there were planes and that I could lead a man to see them."

"I understand," Nick admitted, adding with irony, "And doling out the information a little at a time, you make more money in the long run, eh?"

"You see!" Mahoud exclaimed, smiling without shame.

"The French and the English pay you," Nick resumed and went on, with wasted sarcasm, "Do the Germans also pay you?"

The answer stunned him.

"Oh, no. Some may tell you they do, but all I received is my proper commission on the hire of men and camels. See, I own good camels, while these mangy people have skinny beasts unsuited to long trips and the bearing of heavy loads."

"You mean the planes were brought on camels?"

"No. The small ones were brought in the big one."

"Why do they need camels, then?"

"For the petrol."

"Oh, of course, the gasoline! Comes on camels? From Cisneros?"

"No. From the coast. Takes but four to five days." The interpreter moved rapidly, clutched the gun and held it to one side. "No need for that. It is like the eye of death, staring at me."

Nick laughed and lowered the rifle.

"You fool! If you'd told the English that, they'd have paid you more than you gain. What port, Portendik, Marsa? What ship brings it, French, Spanish?"

"No port. No ship. The men are told where to go and find the petrol under sand, on the beach."

"There are signals?"

"Yes, simple signals." Mahoud explained briefly.

"And you know where they are, the planes?"

"No. They allow no one to come near. However, tomorrow, I shall lead you in the proper direction. You shall see with your own eyes and then be able to put down on paper the figures the English asked of me."

Nick looked into Mahoud's guileless eyes and remembered the warning given by Captain Merlet. Mahoud had needed him for one thing and one only: to ascertain and note down the indications needed by bombers to find and destroy the hidden field. The Moor's method of giving information had not been intelligible to the Europeans.

"You say they allow no one near, Mahoud. They have sentries?"

"Yes. They do not kill—they warn with a shot. If that is not enough, they shoot at the legs. Someone who knows has told them not to start a blood feud."

Nick was beginning to suspect where the Germans had obtained some of their information. Suddenly, he found in himself a strong admiration for Mahoud, who, living in a miserable, tumble-down encampment of Mauritania, contrived to make a fortune out of a World War.

"Have you seen the place?"

"I am alive and unhurt. No."

"How will I get to see it?"

"I shall take you near. Together, we shall see it. And you are very clever, M. Boutros. Everything I have told you, I did not wish to say until tomorrow. One small mistake, and—pouff! You knew."

ARRANGEMENTS were made to start at dawn, Nick, Mahoud and El Mtayeg. Nick pored over the maps, visualized and memorized the ridges, the shallows, the directions of ravines and gullies. He must be on the lookout for some striking feature of the terrain. For the British must be successful in one try. The dropping of bombs on what was technically French soil would cause an incident, and its repetition might start open fighting all up and down the West African Coast, which would definitely not be to the advantage of the United Nations.

As he obtained new details, the Germans' scheme ceased to be fantastic. The Nazis' use of Spanish and French airfields was limited. To use an offiical French field as a base for attack, this far from their main establishments, was to invite crushing counter-raids—and make every move known to their enemies in advance, because the more inhabitants the greater the proportion of spies.

The Germans had located a convenient hiding place. Probably, long before the war, their agents had reported it. They had flown the pursuit ships inside a large transport plane. That plane, which could make the trip from Southern Spain or the Riff very easily, had also brought armed guards, supplies. The Germans had then figured that if a large German machine flew the same route regularly, its destination and mission would be speculated upon. The Messerschmitts must not be discovered.

Therefore, the overland transport of gasoline from the caches on the beach to the Kern el Nhas. There was always some traffic between the fishing posts along the sea and the inland camps. British patrols who saw a string of camels thousands of feet below them would not know they carried gasoline.

If a British radioman had not had the nerve to observe and report, in the face of death, the secret field would not have been suspected. Missing machines would have been thought to have crashed at sea, or overland. One thing was puzzling: the Germans were active only at intervals. What decided that one British machine should be attacked and destroyed, while a dozen others were left alone? The need of secrecy until the time for a special mission? That could not be it—or there would have been no attacks at all. . . .

NICK had hunted Barbary sheep in the Jebel Bani, considered difficult terrain by Saharans. But the Kern el Nhas was no less rugged and the heat seemed even more intense.

That great pile of stone was like an enormous ball of mineral torn loose and rolled from the great cliff that for some three hundred miles separates the terrace of the Chingetti Plateau from the sand plain sloping toward the ocean.

Through countless centuries, the wind had whipped fine sand into the gaps. On the bottom grew date-palm trees and runted, twisted acacias. There was water. Beneath the rocky overhangs, where the sun seldom struck, murky pools

stagnated. And in these pools, miraculously, swam small fish. How the Adam —or the Eve—of those fish had reached that region was a problem.

With El Mtayeb in the lead, the trio traveled as if they had been progressing on the teeth of a gigantic saw. To cover a mile of ground on a horizontal plane, they had to climb three, four, five high rock ridges, skirt sheer drops of hundreds of feet, stepping on narrow ledges, often hanging by the mere strength of their arms on the face of a scaly incline.

An hour after dawn, the stone was growing warm and before long its contact was unpleasantly hot. Below, on the sand, a man's sole contact was his feet, protected by the *nayels*. In the rocks, one's whole body touched, hands, chest, belly, knees.

The slings of the rifle and water-bottle cut into Nick's shoulders, the weight of cartridge-belt and bandoliers oppressed his loins and breast. His palms, his shins, his toes, bled from tiny cuts inflicted by minute, razor-sharp edges of the brown rocks.

When in the Draa Desert, Nick had recorded temperatures of over one hundred and thirty in the shade, the thermometer climbing to one hundred and seventy-five when laid on the ground. And the heat here seemed even more intense. Mahoud, although a born Saharan, appeared to feel the pace somewhat. But El Mtayeb was tireless. He would turn his stupid face and hiss: "*Fissa, fissa,* quick, quick!"

Mahoud explained that there were much easier paths, following the contours of the cliffs, but that they consumed too much time. And that there was an even more direct pathway across the mass, but that only natives could use it.

"Tougher than this one?"

"Oh, much! The hunters follow it."

"Don't show it to me!"

At last, even El Mtayeb made a concession to the blistering heat. He wrapped his left hand in a piece of cloth. Nick imitated him, thinking that on the next occasion he would bring along thick gloves.

He would have liked to sprawl in the shade, on one of the sand drifts amassed by the wind, very fine, soft, white sand. His lungs were bursting from the strain, his heart hammered like a steam piston.

"The way will be easier now," Mahoud announced. "But we'll have to be careful. It is somewhere around here that they have sentries."

## CHAPTER VI

### ONLY FOOLS DIE FOR NOTHING

THEY were following a ledge along the flank of a high cliff, a ledge four feet wide in spots, less than a foot at others. Nick estimated that there was a drop of two hundred and fifty or three hundred feet to the loose rocks below. Across the pit, four hundred yards away, throwing back the heat like a furnace's gate, the other flank of the ravine rose steeply into the blazing sky. There was no ledge there, no pathway, it was as smooth as a brick wall.

Mahoud was some distance ahead, on the heels of the guide.

"Mahoud!"

The Moor whirled about, motioned for silence. When Nick reached his side he warned: "Do not talk above a whisper. The voices hit the other side and are repeated further on."

This passage was like the tube of a funnel, widening slowly. Then the cliffs came closer together. Within a few minutes, El Mtayeb squatted on the ledge, not two feet wide at that point, waited for the others to join him. He gestured to Mahoud, who translated his pantomime.

"You see that bend in the trail, where the ravine tightens like the neck of a bottle? All say that it is dangerous to pass beyond. Their sentries shoot."

Nick took a long look, and agreed that Mahoud had chosen his words rightly. The passage *was* like the neck of a bottle. But he knew that it widened beyond, to form an immense sunken valley, shaped somewhat like a bathtub. He could surmise that from what he saw and what he remembered on the map. This was one of the places he had selected as a possibility.

"I'll crawl forward and have a look

around," he said. He stripped himself of rifle, cartridges, water-bottle.

"Be careful. All men say they shoot without warning."

"Understood."

He went on, his back scraping the rock, hands outspread. All was forgotten for the moment, the heat, the soreness of his muscles. He trembled again, but not from the cool in the shadowy patches. His excitement was like buck fever. He was about to behold what he had come so far, risked so much, to see; something he had known existed yet whose existence he had doubted: an aviation base in this titanic heap of stones.

Nick often had flown at high altitudes, yet the few hundred feet between him and the bottom dizzied and nauseated him. Finding himself less and less steady, he dropped on all fours and carried on thus to within five yards of the bend. There the ledge circled the jutting rock and vanished.

He could see a small section of the valley opening ahead, the sharp rim of the northwest cliff. Down, very far down, he discerned a faintly marked path meandering between loose piles of rocks. And, straight ahead, a sunlit spread of sand, already within the valley. There were the usual clumps of palms, the straggling acacia bush.

Something was moving, he thought.

Yes, he was not mistaken, something was moving. Very far away. On that lighted patch of sand. The air was extremely clear and if he steadied his nerves, concentrated, he would be able to see. He shut his eyes for a long minute, looked again. He identified the moving spots at last: men. He could even count them now, four men. He could not distinguish their arms or legs, they were too remote for him to know more than that they were men and that they were moving.

But they were moving oddly, rapidly at times, to remain still a second before moving again. He dragged himself further on his elbows, as if gaining a few inches would matter. The movements of those men puzzled him. They seemed to return always to the same spots. No work, no human activity that he could think of explained their movements.

His eyes ached, he had to rest them several times.

"What the devil are they doing?" he wondered.

Then, suddenly, he laughed. Something had happened below that gave the key to everything. One of the tiny silhouettes had started to run, halted briefly, run on again. The two figures opposite, which had started to move, came to an unexpected, dead stop. And the first man was going back to his corner of the square slowly.

"Tennis!" he said. "Tennis."

That was it. They were playing tennis down there. Playing well, too. The clue had been that run after a missed ball. That could not be mistaken even at that distance, a sort of a frustrated scrambling. It had never occurred to Nick that the Germans, aviators, mechanics and guards, would have been compelled to organize for recreation. He had imagined them as a sinister, unhuman menace, thinking only of war and destruction. Those four were probably pilots. Most German flyers played tennis.

"Tennis, of course—"

He was still chuckling when there was a whirring sound very near, a cracking impact against the stone, followed by the familiar chant of a flattened bullet spinning through space. The report thudded, not very far away, doubled, multiplied by echoes.

Despite Mahoud's warning, Nick had crept too near the bend, absorbed by the game below.

He leaped to his feet and ran back.

Heedless of the danger of a fall now, he made the two hundred yards to Mahoud in less than thirty seconds. Then all three were on the run. For several minutes, El Mtayeb led the way; they sprinted and hopped, without exchanging a word.

They halted for breath at the first broad platform. Mahoud shoved the rifle into Nick's hands. "If he comes after you, we must shoot. There'll be no time to talk."

They crouched low and waited, for a long time.

No one appeared.

"I've got to go back," Nick announced.

They had retreated further, were hidden in a shallow cave.

"Why?" Mahoud asked. "You know they are there, and you can find the place on the map."

"That valley's pretty long and broad," Nick stated. "I should locate the hangars, which they've probably camouflaged. Hidden under painted canvas, that means. Bombs dropped on the sand would be wasted."

"True," Mahoud agreed. "But how?"

"Isn't there some other path, not guarded?"

"None on this side. And it will take a full day to get atop the other side. And one cannot see much from there without lying down and pushing one's head over the edge. Then the guards on this side will see you and shoot you. A rifle was used just now, because the idea was to scare you off—the man believed you merely a curious sheep hunter. But they have quick-firing guns also, that rain bullets all about."

"Can we flank this sentry?"

"Pass by him? Easily. But sooner or later, somewhere, one has to show oneself to look over, and the head shows against the sky."

"True enough." Nick reflected a while. "See here, Mahoud, men like El Mtayeb and yourself could creep down on the sentry and kill him."

"El Mtayeb could do that with ease. But to what avail?"

"I could then go around the bend and behold all."

"Indeed yes." Mahoud stared at Nick with pity. "And then?"

"Then what?"

"Then the Boches would come to change sentries, find the body, or traces of a struggle and a man missing. One of their planes would go into the air, shoot at the camps with machine guns. The people here would be angry with us. They would kill us or drive us out. And the plane would find us on the open sand, and destroy us with machine guns. There is no radio sender here, save theirs, so our information would never reach anyone." Mahoud laid his hand on Nick's wrist. "No, my friend. We had best be content with what we know."

"That much knowledge could have been bribed from any tracker."

"I do not say no. But only fools die for nothing."

"Still, I must see—"

"No." Mahoud's hand went to the hilt of his knife. "Your life is your own. Mine is my own."

"You threaten me?"

"I defend my life." Mahoud grew excited, spoke rapidly. "I do not want to die here. I am not a fool. You need not—"

El Mtayeb, who did not understand French, noticed their anger.

"*M-mm-esh?*" he asked, his coarse face contorting. "What's wrong?"

"The Nazarene wants to see into the valley. I say—" Mahoud explained quickly. "And I know of no way to lure the guard away."

"*K-kkk-kermoos!*" the semi-idiot volunteered at once.

"What does he say?"

"He means: a woman." Mahoud grinned. "He suggests we use a woman to lure the sentry."

"Where will he find one?" Nick wondered.

"Oh, in one of the camps."

"That will take all day."

"No, not so. He will use the hunters' path. Three hours, he says."

Nick considered the suggestion. The sentry was undoubtedly a young man and lonely. He would not shoot at a woman as readily as at a man. The chances were nine to one that he would try to strike up a closer acquaintance.

"The guard is a European," he objected. "Would El Mtayeb know which woman to pick?"

"His mind is simple," Mahoud replied, seriously. "But he knows what kind of woman a soldier would follow." He exchanged a few words with the guide, hoisted a leather bag from the front of his *gandoura*, loosened the draw-strings, selected a coin. "He'll need money. You are witness that I gave money."

El Mtayeb looked down at the silver coin on his palm. It was an old French five-franc piece, bearing the bearded effigy of Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. Nick had seldom seen its like,

for they had vanished from France during the First World War. Nominally five francs, it was worth eighty and more paper francs at the current exchange.

"It'll be counted as expenses, yes," he consented.

El Mtayeb picked up his gun and departed. Mahoud and Nick sprawled on the sand drift, in the shade. They made a frugal meal, dried meat, dates and water.

"Mahoud," Nick asked. "Some of the cameleers must have seen the valley, when they take in the gasoline?"

"No. There was a camp there, but the Boches ordered everyone away. The cans are delivered in the gully. They have a little automobile with wheels like a tank—"

"A tractor."

"Yes. They use it to take the stuff the rest of the way."

"Did that car come from the coast too?"

"No. The big plane must have brought it."

The two napped for a while. El Mtayeb returned in a surprisingly short time, accompanied by his "lure." As Mahoud had guaranteed, the guide had made a good pick. The girl was young, shapely, dressed in a short, kilt-like skirt of orange silk and a sort of loose, white blouse. She wore Mogador rings and bracelets, of heavy, grayish silver, ornamented with enameled designs.

Mahoud explained what was wanted. Arabic is a direct tongue. Would she dare risk a shot? Could she make the sentry follow her? She nodded and flashed a smile that belied Captain Merlet's statement that a native diet leads to decayed teeth.

NICK had the definite impression that it would not be the first time she had spoken to the outsiders. El Mtayeb possibly had had her in mind, for he had discovered her with amazing speed. Possibly, his trained eyes had discerned the tracks of a woman and reason had had much less to do with his brilliant suggestion than had first seemed the case.

The final details were arranged and the small party retraced its steps. Some distance short of the dangerous turn, the guide halted and indicated a sort of flat jutting rock, thirty feet above the ledge. He climbed first, lowered his waist-rope, drew first Mahoud then Nick to his side. If they kept close to the cliff, they would not be seen from the path.

Nick saw the girl reappear, some distance down the ledge, striding deliberately. In the stillness, he heard a strange sound. Someone was playing a mouth-organ, and playing it very well. He grinned. The sentry was in the proper mood, for he was playing a German song which had become world famous: "*I kiss your hand, Madame!*"

The incident which had caused him to shoot had not lingered on his mind, manifestly. It was likely that few days passed without some curious Moor venturing this far. The instrument shifted tunes, merged into the new number, another sentimental air. Nick had heard it many times in the Saharan outposts of the North, played by German Legionnaires. There were words created by some unknown bard during the Riff Campaign, words adapted from other songs.

> "*In Morocco amid the rocks,*
> *A Legionnaire stood guard—*
> *At his side lay a comrade*
> *Mortally wounded by a bullet. . .*"

The unseen performer lingered and quivered on the mournful notes. Just as he reached, "*Take back a greeting to my true love—*" he broke off.

There was a distant, guttural shout, and the girl's shrill reply. That started a long-range conversation kept up for several minutes. El Mtayeb had closed his eyes and apparently slept. Mahoud was tense, pulling at his mustache.

Then the girl came in sight again, in the short stretch of the ledge visible from Nick's observation point. She was running nimbly, peering over her shoulder. She was as calm, as fearless as if she had been on secure footing. And in her bizarre, colorful costume, she resembled a circus performer. She looked up once, smiled: All was going well.

A minute dragged by, another.

Then the man came around the bend.

Nick saw at once that he need not fear discovery. The fellow did not like the narrower spots much and watched where he stepped. He was very tall, superbly muscled, bare legs, arms and torso tanned to hazelnut hue. He wore khaki shorts, solid leather sandals, an oddly-shaped, flat colonial helmet. He carried a long-barreled automatic pistol in a wooden holster hung against his left hip.

"*Ya, Beida! Qelbi—*"

He was half-laughing, half-angry, and he repeated several times, in a hoarse, coaxing voice: "Oh, Beida, sweetheart!" He knew the girl's name, which omened well for her success. Before long his voice receded in the opposite direction.

"Go now," Mahoud urged him, "and be quick."

Nick felt that if he were discovered resistance would not be of much use. So that he again dropped his rifle, discarded his top garment. Mahoud held the rope while he slid down to the ledge. He trotted to the bend.

Around the bend, his view of the valley widened, but not enough for his purpose. He had to go farther. He came to a sort of deep niche in the cliff, provided with a canvas roof, a folding chair, and a thermos bucket holding about a gallon. On a natural shelf he saw the mouth-organ, a silver-plated instrument. Beside it, a package of cigarettes, a Belgian brand. Against the stone were propped a military rifle equipped with telescope-sights and a light sub-machine gun. On the ground between them two magazines and a pair of field-glasses.

He picked up the field-glasses, after noting their exact position, and walked on. He came to a stop when his glance could sweep the whole valley. It ran from northeast to southwest, and the dry bed of a stream crossed its entire length, the gleam of the polished pebbles clear against the sand. At the nearer end, close to the tennis courts, palm trees and bushes formed an irregular design, resembling the letter F.

He lifted the glasses, adjusted them to his sight, counting the turns to set them again later. His first precaution was to scan the rocky crests, seeking another sentry. He found one, on the north, but so far that even with the glasses he could not distinguish features. Another man in shorts and helmet, seated on a chair. He did not move, and Nick presumed him to be asleep.

Two sentries only—then Nick saw that the spots had been well chosen. From one spot or the other, all practical observation points were within rifle range. And the purpose of the guards was not to defend but to warn away inquisitive natives. For that, no great accuracy was needed.

HE turned his attention to the valley itself. And he understood why the big plane was not used frequently. Landing it down there would be comparatively easy, but taking off was a serious task. He would not have enjoyed taking up a large machine from that pit! And whoever did it was a good pilot. The stone cliffs at either end must loom very near at the end of the run, clearing them called for a sort of kangaroo hop that no flyer would relish.

The pursuit machines could take off almost vertically, and there was plenty of room to handle them—one at a time. He sought for the hangars, located them. At the northern extremity, very neatly camouflaged. From the air, at flying speed, detection would have been almost impossible. The canvas had been painted to match the prevailing colors, the designs continuing natural features of the ground about them. Nick was favored by the angle of vision from the ledge, by a motionless observation-point and chiefly by the fact that those below were ignorant of his presence.

Men moved in and out of those hangars and furnished the clue. There were four large tents nearby, undoubtedly quarters for guards and mechanics. At least a mile away, toward Nick's end of the valley, were three smaller tents. For officers and pilots. The tennis ground was three or four hundred meters closer.

Against the cliff nearby the Germans had contrived to create a swimming pool. Two naked men, wearing helmets, were using it. A third arrived, on a bicycle, to join them. Nick counted the men in sight, presumed at least the same number to be resting. Between twenty-five

and thirty-five. Yet they wielded a power far beyond their numbers.

"Let's see—landmarks. Coming due east to fly above main peak—deep valley with roughly formed letter F. Hangars two thousand yards from top bar, left of dry stream. Estimated altitude of eastern cliff, say five hundred feet. Anti-aircraft—none visible. Surely machine guns, maybe one or two small cannon. That wart over there might be an emplacement for one. Gasoline base not visible. Maybe back of hangars, camouflaged. Can't make out. Other easily recognizable indications, let's see—oh-oh, and it was putting my eyes out!"

He concentrated on something he had believed to be the tracing of a wall. For this, his angle of vision was poor, but it would be plain from above. He had lost sight of the fact that the German flyers also needed a landmark. It had been provided, in the shape of a perfect swastika of white-washed stones, almost in the exact center of the valley. To a flyer coming from the north, the pattern would be unmistakable.

"They're pretty cocky and sure of themselves," he thought.

Yet what would be more natural than this confidence? Those chaps probably knew that the French patrols had been ordered to keep away by the provisional government. A British scouting plane, chancing to get this far inland, would be reported by the sentries. There would be time either for one of the pursuit machines to take off and destroy it, or to camouflage the design.

But a bombing raid could be calculated to reach this place very soon after dawn, by surprise. Nevertheless, Nick memorized the contours of the cliffs.

"Nice installation, at that," he commented. He lifted the glasses again, sought the other guard. He had risen from his chair and was pacing back and forth, slowly. "It's a good thing he doesn't think of looking this way."

After a last glance at the valley, he returned to the sentry's niche. Carefully, he readjusted the glasses to the man's sight, deposited them at exactly the spot they had occupied. With the edge of one hand, he wiped the prints of his sandals from the sifted sand.

He had not been long, fifteen, twenty minutes at the most. And he had no doubt that if the guard had tried to return, Mahoud and El Mtayeb had intercepted him.

Nevertheless, he quickened his steps as he rounded the bend. He looked upward, saw nothing at first, then Mahoud's head lifted into view, his hand beckoned. In five minutes, Nick was seated between his two comrades.

"Did you see?"

"All there was to see. I wish I had a pencil and paper."

"All right."

Mahoud searched in the vast pocket inside his *gandoura*, produced a stub of indelible pencil less than three inches long, and after looking over several items, gave Nick a certificate of origin for a camel's hair cloak, indicating that the reverse side was blank and could be written upon. The agent sketched the valley, noted indications, in English.

"If anything happens to me, Mahoud," he said, "take this paper and send it on. You will be well paid."

"All right." Mahoud scanned the drawing, his lips moved as he tried to read. "It's not in French. Is everything written down?"

"Yes."

"There is nothing more for you to do save leave?"

"That's all. Starting tonight, we can reach the place in two days, I think."

"Yes." Mahoud smiled, and the package of cigarettes reappeared. Then he thought better of it, concealed it. Whether from avarice or the danger of smoking, Nick could not be sure.

"Now, M. Boutros, I trembled for fear that fool would come back. At this moment, I am angry because he delays! The wish of one moment is not always that of the next."

Nick nodded. He was uneasy, remembering Captain Merlet's advice. But he could not think of his own safety first. The important thing was to get his information where it would be of use. Even if Mahoud, in his warped mind, planned to get rid of him to keep all the credit, he would see that the paper was delivered and paid for. From now on, he must be on guard.

A while later, Mahoud broke the silence, whispering: "Almost an hour by now. Aye, I think this is not the first time that Nazarene has trailed Beida. When a woman appears, you are the same as Moor and Arab, double fools and triple asses."

El Mtayeb opened his eyes, lifted his head, snapped a few words punctuated by jerks of his chin.

"What does he say?" Nick asked. He did not understand the guide as well as Mahoud.

"He says he smells death."

"Cheerful beggar! Whose death dost thou smell, El Mtayeb?"

"He says just death. Doesn't know whose. He says we must go away." Mahoud addressed the poor chap in a scolding voice. "We cannot go. The Nazarene has not returned." The guide bobbed his head, looked upward, down. "He wants to go now," Mahoud resumed, uneasily. "Perhaps—he's touched by Allah, you know."

"We'd be sure to run into the soldier," Nick said.

"I know. And yet—" Mahoud broke off, half-smiled. "You are right. That he smells death signifies nothing. Everything smells of death in these hills. Be still, El Mtayeb. Thou art disturbed because thou hast been too long away from the smell of camels."

The guide gaped, stammered, then subsided with a gesture embracing the sky, as if to say: "Allah will know."

And it was Nick's turn to be uneasy. Superstition is one thing in a normal world, in a well-policed country. And quite another in the open. If one admitted that El Mtayeb found his way across the wastes by instinct, it became easier to grant him other knowledge beyond the perception of ordinary mortals.

"If that fool would only get back!"

He shifted his position on the stone, seeking a cooler spot. The sun had swung around the sky and was beating on them harder. In the movement, he was looking straight at El Mtayeb, and beheld something very strange. From the man's face came a loud sound. Before Nick's eyes, the tight, brown skin burst just above the temple. El Mtayeb slithered sideways, then rested on his shoulder.

That instant, his ears rang with the detonation. Another shot, a third, a fourth. Instinctively, Nick clasped his hands over his face, crouched closer to the rock. He knew that Mahoud had been hit, for he heard the impacts, heard him groan. There was no time to move, no chance, on this crowded platform, with a dead man leaning across him and another sprawled over his legs. The next shot would be for him.

In an instant, he reacted against terror, struggled to free himself, to grasp his rifle.

"Don't move," a voice called from above. "Don't turn around. Listen—" The man spoke in French, with a heavy German accent. But he was not excited. "You are safe for the present, if you don't play the fool. You hear?"

"Yes."

"I've shot your *bicos* and I can shoot you as easily, remember. You'll get up. Go ahead, get up. Right. Pick up the nearest rifle. Yes, that one. Throw it down. Wait, not on the ledge, way out. That's it. Now the other, near the old guy. By the barrel, eh! Now, throw it out. Fine. The third is behind you, the other side of the stiff. A little to the right, you've got it. Throw it out. Right—"

The orders kept coming, unhurried, calm. The knives of the three followed the rifles into the precipice. After that, the water-bottle and the two small antelope-skins carried by the Moors had to go.

"If you have a gun—lift up your clothes—no, you haven't. Anyway, remember you have no water, and if you try to beat it, I'll follow you and plug you. I'm going to shoot again. Don't worry, it's not at you. A signal."

Two reports thudded. A few seconds later, two distant shots answered, followed by two more, even further away. The first pair, Nick judged, from the valley, the next from the other sentry.

"All clear, nothing to worry about, eh?" the man, whom Nick naturally presumed to be the guard, concluded in a cheerful tone. "I'll take you down tonight."

"Who are you? You're not French,"

Nick said. He was beginning to think again. And Sir Andrew had advised him to deny his identity, against any evidence.

"No, I'm not French."

"Then what—"

"We'll talk later. Take the rope. Tie it over there. Get down on the trail. Eh, wait a minute. The big guy has a sack with money in it under his clothes. Get it."

Nick had to turn Mahoud's body over to do this. His hands were stained with blood. The Moor's head dropped back with a thud on the rock. His mustaches were limp, his teeth showed. Only the whites of his eyes could be seen under the lowered lids. Nick located the leather bag, snapped the thin leather cord.

"That's it," the guard approved. "And if you try to spite me by tossing it away, I won't take you down after all. Get going now, down—"

Nick slid over the edge, reached the path.

"Now, pull on the rope until it comes free. That's it. Throw it down. All right, thanks a lot. Now, I'll join you. Can't come down straight. Had the devil of a time getting here in the first place. Got to circle. But I'll be on that ledge inside fifteen minutes, and if I have to go and look for you, it'll be too bad. If I have to do much more walking, I'll lose my temper and get nasty. You'll wait, eh, like a good fellow?"

"All right." Nick did not risk turning around. "Maybe one of the men up there's still alive. His heart was beating."

"Hell, what can I do about it? He'll die by sundown. Or the cold of the night'll finish him. So long, see you soon."

Nick squatted on the ledge, hugging his knees. He waited for several minutes.

"Eh, up there?"

There was no answer. He turned slowly, scanned the cliff. And he saw no one. He opened the bag, found the paper. That was the only evidence of his mission. He had failed, but he might yet escape with his life. If he could convince the Germans, in their turn, that he was Boutros Abdelnour, Syrian trader.

Tiny fragments of paper drifted down the precipice, swirled a while in the wind sweeping through, scattered, vanished. Above him, El Mtayeb was dead, Mahoud was dying.

## CHAPTER VII

### REUNION IN THE SAHARA

THE guard appeared on the ledge, walking swiftly.

He was a magnificent physical type, six feet two or three, all bones and muscles, massive without clumsiness. Seen closer, the sunlight turned the blond fuzz on his limbs and chest to pale gold and he resembled an animated statue. His face might be somewhat flat, his features blunt, but he could not be denied a brutal, reckless handsomeness. He reminded Nick of someone, something—yes, a Teuton swordsman from the Roman Circus, a reincarnated gladiator.

He stopped ten feet away. "Throw the sack over here." Nick complied. The man stooped, keeping the pistol level and his eyes on his captive. He hefted the leathed bag as he straightened up. "All silver?"

"I think there's gold, too."

"Good. I don't mind that, you know. Was afraid he had a lot of bronze junk. Now, stand up—walk ahead of me—no, wait a minute. Look at me."

"All right."

The two faced each other. To Nick, the man seemed more and more familiar. And the German appeared to know him, scanned his face. Under the ragged turban, with the mustache and the bruises, Nick knew he was hard to identify.

"You are Mr. Nichols," the other said, in slow English. He waited for an answer, but Nick was too startled to speak. "You were with the young American who died, the millionaire. You do not remember me? Ludwig, who plays the harmonica?"

"Ludwig? Is that you?"

"*Ja wohl,* I am a little Ludwig. Seventeen years was I only. More than twenty centimeters I have grown." The big fellow smiled, shifted the pistol to his left hand, offering the right. "I speak

French better. I am glad to see you again, Mr. Nichols."

Nick accepted the hand. What else could he do?

"And I'm glad to see you, Ludwig."

"Still taking cinematograph pictures?" The sentry shrugged, laughed. "But this is no place to talk. We go and sit down. Walk before me, please." They rounded the bend, kept on to the sentry's niche in the cliff. "You take the chair, Mr. Nichols. A cigarette?"

"Thanks, Ludwig."

"*Unteroffizier* Reggenbach, Mr. Nichols, *Fallschirm-Jäger, Afrika Korps,*" Ludwig announced, not without pride. There was a deep pit, his tone indicated, between a callow private of the French Foreign Legion, such as he had been, and a non-commissioned officer of Parachute-Riflemen in the African Corps, such as he had become.

"A sergeant, eh?"

"No one here below that rank, Mr. Nichols. Specially selected, from many candidates. Had to have a minimum of five years' desert experience for this, even the technical men. Green fellows would have gone nuts. So, more than two-thirds are from the Legion."

"But your enlistment had not expired in 1939."

"No. But after we beat the French, all of the Germans who wanted to leave were allowed to go. I was in Libya, first, where we beat the British. Then—" Ludwig lifted his right arm, showed a scar. "Bullet. At Tobruk. I convalesced in Italy, then reported to my outfit and they detached me to this bunch. Special rating, extra pay."

The German reached for the thermos, unscrewed the top. He offered Nick a cup of steaming hot tea, very sweet and evidently laced with a certain amount of rum.

"It's cooling. Evens the heat in and out."

"Listen, Ludwig, one of those fellows you shot may be alive—"

"He is dead now. I shot true." Reggenbach moved his heavy shoulders. "I'm sorry, it was a mistake. But I thought you were spies. If I had seen you in time, I would have warned you away."

Nick saw that his captor did not suspect him of any connection with the war. In fact, why should he have? Ludwig, as a second-class Legionnaire, had seen Nick and his friend, "The Millionaire," several times, at various outposts, when there was no possible motive for his presence save that stated: travel in search of film material. The big fellow believed that Nick was simply continuing his activities in another region of the Sahara.

"You remember Kaunitz, Mr. Nichols? The radio-specialist corporal at Achana? He's here, too. But he's an *oberfähnrich* now, almost an officer. He mentioned you the other day. About the time when he fixed something for Mr. Richard, and he got five hundred francs, just like that. Six months' pay for an afternoon's job. He never forgot it, felt like an emperor!"

"I remember him well. He liked to drink and—" Nick gestured.

"That's the guy."

A sharp, rattling sound startled Nick, who half rose. Ludwig reassured him with a grin, reached back of the coffer with one hand, pulled out a field-telephone. "Forgot to report. *Heil Hitler!*" He uttered a word that was evidently a signal, then talked in German for some time. "Did you understand?" he asked as he hung up.

"No. Sounded like stalling him off."

"Just that, Mr. Nichols. That was the *oberleutnant* on duty below. Wanted to know what had happened. Even though I had reported all clear. See, we have to call if we fire more than two shots. Explain. They figure two are all that's needed for a warning. I told him that I had had to shoot a couple of guys and that I was looking for another. I don't want him snooping up here."

"Why not?"

"What about Beida? There's four of us know her, all ex-Legionnaires. But we're not supposed to get friendly with the natives. They don't kid with that stuff in our army—this isn't the Legion, you know. And that little guy's poison. He wasn't in the Legion, you see—got his experience in the British Soudan, mineralogist or something like that. Pushes himself, too—"

"He does?"

"You bet. For instance, if I told him you were here, he'd be up like a shot, to take you down himself and get the credit. But none of that. *Unteroffizier* Reggenbach'll bring you in! Can you play chess?"

"Uh? Why, yes—"

"You good at it?"

"Not bad."

"The colonel'll love you. You're American and there's a war on. But a fresh chess player'll be his pal. We don't get papers as often as when the macaronis delivered."

"The macaronis?"

"Yes. The Italian Line that used to fly to Dakar and on to Natal. They'd leave mail and stuff for us at Dakar. But the service has stopped. And, as there's orders against using the big bus, we're pretty well cut off. We get the radio news, sure. But we can't send from here, except in an emergency. Sometimes, the U-boats send magazines along—"

Despite the unabated heat, Nick felt as if he had been immersed in cold water, for an instant. Ludwig had passed on to another subject, but his mind clung to: U-boats, submarines, communications. He must guard against asking direct questions, if he wanted the big fool to keep on chatting. He was looking down at the ledge, and saw the thin wire of the telephone strung in a groove across it. He had missed that detail on his first trip!

"Pretty well organized up here," he said.

"Yes, a little different from the French posts, eh?" Ludwig beamed with pride. "The sick-room's air-conditioned, even. And we're hoping to fix the whole place the same way. You'll see, all the way down, we've got clamps and cut steps, it's as easy as a stairway." He started. "But say, Mr. Nichols, you had been here before—"

"Yes."

"And you'd seen these—" Ludwig reached out and touched the rifle, the sub-machine gun. "You didn't know I was a friend. Why, you could have come and got one of them."

"I thought of it," Nick lied. "But without water, what chance—"

"That's right." The guard lighted another cigarette. "You know, I didn't get wise right away. That jane, Beida, she'd done that before. Got me to chase after her. She's half-wild, you know. But she's crazy about me." He shrugged modestly. "You know how those Moorish dames go after anything light, like me."

"She likes you, so she told you?"

"Well, she wouldn't let me catch up with her. She shows me a piece of money. She doesn't want our money, because it's paper. We swipe stuff for her, parachute silk from flares, cans of beef, needles, spools of thread. She says that's what she wants—money."

"What can she do with money way out here?"

"Have necklaces made of the gold. Or maybe get her old man to buy her something with it at Atar. He's gone to the coast with the gang, but the date set this time can't be later than the tenth. Brings him back by the fifteenth or sixteenth. Then we pay them off, and some of them go to the stores." Ludwig grew thoughtful suddenly. "Say, Mr. Nichols, you won't mention my talking to you, or my taking the dough?"

"No."

"Because I might get into trouble. Only the officers are supposed to know about the ship and the U-boats. It's serious, Mr. Nichols. They might even shoot me." The guard was still respectful, but his light blue eyes were perturbed, and he was thinking of the surest method of keeping his indiscretions from his chiefs. "See, Mr. Nichols, I know you're all right, but they don't—"

"I promise not to say a word, Ludwig." Nick extended his hand. "I swear it."

"It's important, you know. If the British—"

"Sure, I know. You people are not supposed to be here."

"Yes. And they'd know that when our machines are out, it's to cover the U-boats. Wouldn't take much to put them wise. Our colonel spoke to us, said that the English had agents everywhere, maybe even here, and that was why we could not send away anything but printed forms signed with our names."

"He's right."

Ludwig had recovered from his surprise at meeting Nick. He opened the bag, sorted the papers. Then he piled the coins, counted them.

"Mr. Nichols, did you make much money with those films you took?"

"Up north, in the Draa? No. They were too real to be exciting. For instance, the fight didn't show up well. Just the behinds of guys lying in sand and shooting a gun once in a while."

THE German drew the strings of the bag, keeping only two silver coins, which he jiggled in his hand. "That'll be enough for a start. I got to go and leave them where the dame can find them." He lifted the telephone, spoke at some length. Nick understood much of it. Ludwig announced that he would be away from post for a period of an hour or more, but would keep within gun signal. He had seen another native and would see what he could do about arresting him. Ludwig might not be intelligent, but he was crafty and a smooth liar.

He spoke with his heels together, at attention. When he paused, Nick heard the metallic voice of the other man, but could not make out his words. Ludwig barked back guttural assent, hung up.

"Come along." He stood and motioned for Nick to go ahead.

Nick walked around the bend, reached the familiar stretch of ledge. Down the rock from the place where he had left the bodies of his companions, streaks of blood had trickled and dried.

"Further," Ludwig grunted.

The tone of his voice had altered. He had ceased calling him Mr. Nichols, had resumed his first, threatening speech.

The change had come after the telephone call. Had the officer forbidden a capture? Or had his suspicion that he had talked too freely to Nick led to a decision? In any case, Nick was certain that the big man had made up his mind to kill him. As the late El Mtayeb might have put it, Nick smelled death.

Fear tightened his heart painfully. He could not walk on. He must know. He turned suddenly and caught Ludwig in the act of drawing the pistol. Even without that gesture, the expression of brutish, sullen determination would have been a proof.

In a lightning second, fear merged into anger, anger fused into hate. The big swine could have kept his mouth shut! Somehow, it seemed unfair to die because someone else had talked too much. All right, Nick thought, all right —but we'll both go.

Ludwig, confident in his superior bulk and strength, had expected Nick to run. But the other lunged forward, clutched the gun hand with desperate fingers. The guard reeled back under the impact, bent his knees to absorb the first shock. He had waited for a broader stretch, to have secure footing and a good aim. So he was able to check their slide within a foot of the edge.

"Orders, orders," he repeated, foolishly, as if that magic word might convince Nick to stand still and be killed. "Be careful, we'll both fall if you do that!"

His conceit, his confidence were so overwhelming that he actually undertook to shake Nick loose with one hand. And he was as strong as a bull. He proved it when, having decided that the brink was too risky, he headed for the cliffside, almost carrying his opponent at arm's length.

"*Ja, so!* One wants to fight. *Ja, so!*"

They stood face to face, panting. Nick braced a foot on the rock, pushed. The big fellow's sandals creaked on the thin coating of sand, seemed to take root in the stone. His expression was one of mild anger and impatience, as if he had an unpleasant task to do. He tried to slap down across Nick's neck with his free hand, but Nick flattened against the rock. They struggled for some time.

Then Ludwig's slow mind reached a conclusion: Nick could not hope to survive, so he must be fighting not to live but to kill. And that frightened him. He sought to scrape the pistol's sight across the knuckles of the fingers clamped on his wrist. But he failed. He realized he must settle this leathery, wiry chap on this exact spot. Nick tried to kick him, the blows caught him on the shins, he grunted and winced.

His left hand opened, groped for a throat hold. He missed and clutched at the face. Nick bit one of his fingers to the bone. In yanking it free, the German knocked off his helmet, which rolled and came to a stop, balanced on the exact brim of the precipice.

Ludwig was becoming more and more miserable.

His skull, protected only by short-cropped hair, was exposed to the sun. The sweat poured down his face, partially blinded him. If he gave this maniac room to move, he might be pushed,

*Nick lunged forward, clutched the gun hand with desperate fingers.*

jerked or hauled over the edge. He flipped the useless pistol over his shoulder. With both hands free, he could wrestle, and he knew how to wrestle. Now he twisted his wrist clear. But Nick was inside his arms, digging nails into his left biceps, fingers twisted in the belt of the shorts.

*"Ja, so!"*

Nick was trying to lift him clear of the ground. Ludwig gave at the knees, using his full weight. His right arm circled Nick's head, hand locked on the chin. He was winning, was superior in strength, in skill, but it availed nothing. If he threw Nick and there was a scramble, he might go over!

He tried to knock Nick out with punches. But his left arm was cramped near the wall, and clumsy. He could not set himself, was wary of a trick. Then he solved the problem: his left hand closed on the nape of Nick's neck, to shut off the blood from the brain.

His hand was so large that thumb and fingers were not six inches apart—Nick felt as if his neck were completely circled. And he was growing harder to hold, as the perspiration made his tough skin slippery. Nick felt about to lose consciousness. Lights crackled inside his eyeballs.

Then, slowly, strength oozed out of Ludwig's grip, his weight increased, but mushy instead of rigid. Nick breathed deeply, set himself. He was not fooled, this was a ruse, a preliminary to some wrestling trick that would fling him far, over the edge—or ten feet away, to lie stunned on the rock. He held on to the belt, waited. Ludwig could not throw himself! As long as he had a good hold of that belt, everything was fine!

Then the big man's massive arms slithered, hung. Nick arched his back against the cliff, pushed suddenly. Ludwig reeled back, fell on his side. Nick let go the belt, leaped over his opponent, picked up the pistol.

His enemy was still there, hoisting himself erect, staring about him, the eyes very clear in his scarlet face. He boxed the air in futile, paddling gestures. Nick kept the muzzle of the pistol on him, still suspecting a sham.

Ludwig took a step, another—one more would bring him to the brink. One more step. He disappeared, and there was the sickening, breathless wait. Then, far below, the muffled impact.

IT was several minutes before Nick understood.

The sun helmet supplied the right clue. Ludwig had suffered a stroke. The powerful rays blasting his bare skull, after his fear, his exertions of the day, had proved too much. Nick had seen other Europeans go down like poled oxen.

"M. Boutros!"

The call was weak, but very clear. He walked some yards, looked up. Mahoud was looking down. His neck was swathed in an enormous collar of cloth.

"Are you badly hurt?" Nick asked.

"Badly, yes. But I shall not die of it."

"I'll try to come up and help you down."

"No need to come up. I have made a rope of El Mtayeb's clothing. But I can use but one arm, and need someone below to steady me. I have lost my mind several times." He meant, of course, that he had lost consciousness. "Is there any water?"

"There is drink. Rest where you are until I come back."

For the third time, he reached the sentry's niche. He picked up the rifle. From the coffer, he took four additional clips for it, two magazines for the pistol, the remnants of food. The money sack had been dropped behind the box, near the telephone.

Nick felt that he had ample time. Ludwig would not be expected to report for an hour. He took along the thermos bucket. It was awkward to carry on the ledge, had to be swung carefully in the narrower spots. He had expected Mahoud to be amazed by the thermos, but the native merely asked: "What's in the thermos?"

He threw down the end of the rope, which Nick held steady, and slid down with one arm! As he had announced, he was dizzy for a moment, and had to be held. He squatted down beside the bucket and drank the sweet, hot tea gratefully.

"This is good for me," he explained.

"It has quinine in it. I shall have very bad fever before long." He munched what was left of Ludwig's lunch readily. "Good meat. I need strength." His finger touched the thick bandage on his neck. "Took off a lump of flesh as big as your thumb. That was meant for behind the ear." He indicated his left shoulder. "That was meant for the heart. Too high and to the left. Broke bones, touched the lung. I thought I would die before I stopped the bleeding, with the sand and cloth. The walk will be hard on me."

"You cannot walk, Mahoud."

"If I do not, they will find me and kill me before you can send help. I must walk or die. So I can walk. Unwind the rope, tear strips and fasten my packs securely. With one hand, I could do but a poor job. Do not fear, I can stand great pain."

His teeth gritted as Nick tightened the pads over the wounds. He did not worry over-much about infection. Moroccans and Saharans have phenomenal endurance. There are any number of cases on record of trepanations without anesthetics, accomplished with a hammer and cold chisel. There are many men walking the desert whose intestines were shoved back into the abdominal cavity, the cut stitched with ordinary thread and needles. The Moors are the brethren of those dervishes who could run fifty yards with a bullet through the heart.

"Hurts?"

"Yes. But this is nothing. The hardest was keeping still, my eyes to the sun, thinking that I was bleeding to death, yet knowing that death was there if I moved. He was a good shot, and would not have missed a third shot."

"You were conscious?"

"When you tore loose the bag? Yes." He paused and asked: "You talked with him. He asked for the bag. The woman betrayed us?"

"Yes."

"She will die young." Mahoud rose, swayed, steadied. "My wish brought you back to help me. I shall not die. Not now. Nine times before was I wounded. M. Boutros—"

"Mahoud?"

"I heard you ask him to help me."

"Yes." Nick touched the extended palm with his own, kissed his fingertips. "All is forgotten, Mahoud. There is friendship now. Say no more. I shall leave you at the nearest water, inform your people. We may meet again, Allah willing."

Mahoud nodded. "Yes. You will come back. But there is no need to go over the mountains, as we did this morning. My men and my camels are at the foot of the next descent. Waiting for me. I gave them orders to start by mid-afternoon. For a well man, the way is easy and takes three hours. With me, it will take five or six."

"So you knew where we'd come out?"

"Yes. Why I did not tell you is part of what you have said was forgotten."

"Right. But when they find their man gone, they may send the planes after us."

"No. They will find El Mtayeb, by the blood on the rocks. They will find spots of my blood. And they will say: He fell while pursuing curious natives. Never do their planes appear except for the two days when the caravan waits by the sea."

THE first two hours proved difficult. Stoical though he was, Mahoud was human, and suffering defeated him on occasions. The ledge's narrow stretches forced him to progress sideways, his back to the pit, to keep his wounded shoulder from touching the stone. Once, he addressed Nick: "If I call to you to take my hand, run away. It will mean that my mind has gone again, that I am about to fall. I would only drag you along."

"Understood, Mahoud," Nick retorted with the same simplicity.

When they emerged in a wider ravine, which sloped, broad and secure, down to the plain, it was almost dark, although the sky remained as luminous as before and the crests were bright as gold. They found a small pond under an overhang, stretched on their bellies and lapped up the brackish water greedily.

"Why did the Boche not shoot you at the start?" Mahoud asked.

"First he thought I would make a

valuable captive. Then we had known each other elsewhere. Then he wanted to slay me to keep his theft secret."

Mahoud pushed himself erect, wiped his mouth with his good hand. "When I have both arms sound and strong again, M. Boutros, I shall teach you what you should have done. You had him by the wrist, at the beginning. Stooping and pulling, you would have thrown him right over your back."

Nick heard him out patiently, as they walked. Moor or European, Chinese or American, men were much alike. They could always have done much better than the next fellow. Mahoud had led them straight into an ambush; the guide, "inspired of Allah," had suggested the woman!

And, even as he thought this, a sizable stone fell two feet ahead of him. And it was Mahoud, feverish and weak as he was, who located the thrower. Nick followed his directions, and discerned a small silhouette on a ledge several hundred yards away, snaking along the flank of a cliff. Another stone fell nearby.

"That's the wanton," Mahoud stated. "Shoot her."

"The devil with that," Nick retorted. "It's murder. She can't hit us, except by chance. And she has a right to be sore."

Mahoud stamped up and down in one place like a peevish child.

"She knows who has the gun! She knows you are a fool and won't shoot because she is a woman!"

Nick started to laugh. "She's right, you know."

"And she will go back and talk to that big fool's comrades, let them know a European was here and saw, and escaped! Then will the planes seek us and kill us! We shall all die, and because you are a fool about women—she caused El Mtayeb to die, the sentry, she caused me to be crippled."

Nick ceased laughing. If he died, and Mahoud also, it would be weeks, months, before the British learned anything more. Ships and men, thousands of men—

"Be still, you deafen me, Mahoud."

He verified the loading of the Mauser. He shouldered it. And brought the cross-hairs on Beida. Her eyes were good, she had seen the gesture. She started to run along the ledge, seeking a hiding place, with the graceful strides Nick had so admired. He pressed the trigger. The weapon was semi-automatic, and she had not a chance. She went down at the third shot.

Mahoud shaded his eyes. "She may be tricking you. Shoot again."

Through the telescope, Nick distinguished the black hair, the white blouse, the orange kilt. He knew she was hit. Otherwise, she would have hugged the rock, crawled out of sight. If she was dead, nothing mattered. If she was wounded, it was best to finish her.

He fired several times, could see the body move as his bullets struck. When the magazine was empty, he threw the gun down.

"I think she's dead," Mahoud commented.

"Yes, she's dead!" Nick cried out. And for the next few minutes, Mahoud believed him gone mad. He sat on the sand, refused to get up, would not touch the rifle. He wept and swore, in French and in Arabic.

And all that time, he seemed to stand outside of himself and consider his twitching body with sympathetic understanding. It was a nervous reaction, that was all. He knew that disposing of Beida, who deserved no man's pity, had been necessary. He did not weep over her so much as over himself.

The strain had accumulated until his nerves had been unable to bear further tension. He had been assailed by too many fears, of too many kinds. He had seen men riddled within two feet of him, he had cowered before bullets. Then he had faced captivity, endless and boring, failure on the verge of success.

At least once he had not only accepted death, but had sought it, the most horrible death. He had imagined his body squashed, lying with broken bones, at the foot of the cliff. He had seen a powerful man stagger and drop, had heard the impact.

Slowly, he regained control of himself.

Mahoud had stooped painfully, held out the rifle with his good arm.

"Reload, M. Boutros. It is wrong to leave a gun unloaded in the desert."

Nick rose and puzzled him still more by laughing.

"All right, Mahoud. On one condition, though."

"Yes. What?"

"Don't call me Boutros. I'm sick of it."

## CHAPTER VIII

### H. M. S. BRISTOL

"I UNDERSTAND you had a rather rough time of it," said Lieutenant-Commander Barcey, the intelligence officer with the cameo profile and the sleek black hair.

The steward had cleared away most of the dishes. Nick was sipping hot tea, very sweet, as he had learned to like it in the Sahara. He was smoking a good Virginia cigarette. Four hours of sleep in a comfortable cabin of H.M.S. *Bristol*, quantities of bacon, poached eggs on toast, marmalade, had made a new man of him inwardly. A bath, the use of a razor, a borrowed white uniform that fitted him well, had made a new man of him outwardly.

The port was open and the sea wind swept in, briny and clean, without the least taint of Mauritania, more than one hundred and fifty miles due East.

"In spots, yes, sir," Nick agreed. "I must have looked pretty seedy this morning. Oddly enough, though, what knocked me endwise was the rocking in the dinghy, coming over from the plane. I'd been a bit chilly aloft, and the combination of hot sun and pitching—well, you saw."

"You made connection with the plane easily, I hear."

"Easily, no, sir. I'd been on the go constantly for almost two days to reach the assigned spot. Then, somehow, I thought the chaps had failed to see my rifle flashes and were leaving. When they came about, I felt relieved. But I had to run half a mile or more to board. Then I got a shock. You know how those things are. I'd believed Flying Officer Marlow would come for me, and when I was hailed by another voice—"

"Ah, yes. You presumed, of course, that a plane from our ship would pick you up. Fact is, the chaps who did get you came from the base at Bathurst. Went back at once, you know. As soon as they reported picking you up, I notified Sir Andrew. He should be aboard before long."

"Where's he coming from?"

"I suppose it isn't confidential for you, old man," Barcey smiled. "He comes from Freetown, this time. But he gads about a great deal, you know; has no end of things to attend to. Very busy coast, this."

"Yes, sir."

There was a lengthy pause, then Barcey indicated the maps, papers, pencils. "You can clear up your memory a bit, make notes. If you need anything, ring the steward. Have me notified if you wish to stretch your legs on deck—"

"They're stretched for a while, thank you, sir."

"I mean, some of our men have never seen you and you might be questioned. All right, then."

Left alone, Nick consulted the maps and charts.

On this very ship, in a cabin not fifty feet away, and but a few days ago, all the markings had appeared of equal importance. But now, for instance, reading the name Repoux in small letters, Nick could see the long, narrow building in which he had spent a night in irons, the rows of sordid tents; he smelled the reek of burning camel-dung, the odor of boiling millet.

A few inches to the right, conspicuous as a fly in milk, was the Kern el Nhas. It seemed puzzling now that they had not selected it from the scattering of such rocky formations. The valley, shaped far more like a cello-case than a bathtub, after all, was easily located. This particular sheet must have been engraved from air photograph corrections. The outline was perfect; Nick could trace it with the tip of a pencil and evoke the physical images at once.

He made a large sketch, marking the hangars, the men's residence, the officers' camp, the suspected gun-pit. As he worked, his body swayed with the lurchings of the cruiser. At intervals, whistles blew, pipes shrilled, bells rang, boots clattered.

He jotted down notes. The bombing job would not be difficult. Nick suggested that the machines should strike the coastline thirty miles north of the Kern el Nhas, favored by the pre-dawn wind which ordinarily blew inland. That the formation should veer southward to approach its target from the northeast, the wind muffling the sounds of motors, or perhaps they could glide. The machines then could clear the cliff, drop very low to release their bombs and bob up and out at the narrow end.

"I'll ask permission to go," he decided.

Not much danger to it beyond the normal risks of mechanical failure. The anti-aircraft fire would be very weak, if any, and each ship would be exposed to it only a few seconds. If the flyers knew their business, and Nick knew they did, they could not miss.

The presence of three score men in that remote gully of the desert had affected the fate of many hundred thousands, in Europe and West Africa, in South Africa, in the Indian Ocean, in Arabia and Syria, in Egypt, in Russia, in India, the Indies and Australia. In eddies, the threat had reached America. For if British tonnage were lost in the Atlantic on its way to the Red Sea, the Gulf, the Far East, American tonnage must replace it. The presence of a handful of Germans in Mauritania influenced the destiny of New Englanders!

"Hello, young fellow."

Sir Andrew was as smooth and round as before. His small hand squeezed Nick's fingers. Behind him, Barcey closed the door. This time, cigarettes were produced at once. And Nick felt more confident, in clean clothing. As he sat down, the old man spoke.

"Kern el Nhas?"

"Yes, sir."

"Found Mahoud ben Takoul rather a ruffian, eh what?"

"An opportunist, sir," Nick replied. "A businessman using the local methods."

"Precisely what I said, no? Who examined your papers? Brissaud, Merlet? Merlet's a smart fellow. But suppose you tell me in your own way. We're listening. With great interest, need I add?"

Nick's narration took but a few minutes. Shorn of his personal impressions, the facts were surprisingly few. Sir Andrew asked some questions. He appeared to know a good deal of what Nick had found out and the young man was somewhat nettled.

"You think your precious Mahoud can be trusted now?"

"Well, he's a vindictive chap, sir, and he's no doubt permanently crippled."

"We knew, of course, that he was playing a double game, and that he knew what was going on. But he wouldn't give us definite information, even though we'd sent one of our men from Podor to prod him.

"With you arriving on a definite mission, he had to reveal what he knew or dispose of you promptly. What puzzled us was his interest in keeping things going as they were. We did not understand where his profit came in. We should have guessed."

"How, sir?" Barcey wondered.

"For the very reason that the French have granted him a semi-official standing and that we resorted to him. The Germans needed a go-between, Mahoud was all indicated. He is a native of the region, yet speaks French very well, can understand, grasp, what is asked of him. He has grown wealthy and influential, and Moors would not dare to cheat him as they would transients.

"He has collected the head-tax for the French for the past six years, so that he knows every encampment, every tribal group, every man, and is known in his turn. If the Germans needed overland transportation, they had to seek him."

"But the base, sir, what about that?"

"We shall have to persuade the Admiralty people that we need a carrier down here. That will not be easy, as we have not many to spare. Young fellow, you understand, you say, why the pursuit planes appear only on rare occasions?"

"I believe I do, sir."

"Please explain again."

"The Germans have submarines operating off this coast—"

"It's been rumored," Barcey commented dryly.

"Those submarines run out of fuel, supplies, shells, torpedoes. Their nearest official base is Bordeaux, in Occupied France. Even if they have bases on the Spanish coast, the trip remains long and risky, and a submarine is useless without ammunition. Even if Vichy consents, the submarines cannot put in at Dakar or Konakry, for their presence would be reported and they could be attacked by British patrols from Bathurst or Freetown."

"Right. Carry on."

"All along the West African coast, there is no quiet bay, no cover in which they could take shelter. There is Levrier Bay, for instance, but it could be corked like a bottle. So the submarines are forced to meet the supply-ship not too close to land, because of the heavy surf. The Mauritanian coast has practically no inhabitants, almost no traffic."

"Right."

"Efficient though the crews may be, submarines taking on fuel and torpedoes are not prepared for an emergency dive. A spot is chosen where it is probable that no one will appear during the operations. But there remains the possibility that one of your scouting planes from a convoy will chance to come within sight. I believe that the base was established primarily to reduce the effect of this possibility.

"The pursuit machines of the Germans are certainly of the very latest types. They are handled by veteran, picked pilots. When the supply-ship meets the submarines, consequently, and only then, a fighting plane leaves the base. It flies very high, and attacks by surprise. In case there were more than he could handle, the pilot radios an alert, and there is time for the submarines to dive. The same holds true if one of your surface ships happens to be dangerously near. These meetings of supply-ship and submarines occur perhaps once a month, perhaps once a fortnight. Plane protection can be arranged, for if the base does not use the wireless to send messages, it receives news."

"What do you think, Barcey?"

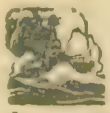
"Somewhat fantastic, sir. But I own that it agrees with what has happened to our aircraft. Destroyed by surprise attacks, and in a zone where normally nothing of the enemy is seen. Taking on supplies off shore would be risky, sir, but they know how to take risks. As this gentleman says, the coast is almost deserted.

"There are a few French merchantmen in convoys, which we know about and permit. They proceed on schedule, and can be avoided easily. Other craft around here are so few that they are known by sight, familiar silhouettes, sir. A half-dozen rather large fishing boats, easily identified, from Senegal. The French sloop out of Dakar, *Capitaine Duflos*. She plies to Port-Etienne with supplies and mail about once a fortnight."

"But the supply-ship? She must be reported, seen, Barcey."

"There is one possibility. The *Luisa*, sir. Formerly German, tender for the Lufthansa, years ago. Now Spanish. Goes to Juby, Cisneros and Spanish Guinea rather oftener than seems necessary. I suggested that she be visited long ago, sir."

"Yes, I remember. But she's operating under charter for the Spanish Government. Her catapult has been removed, she carries no planes now. Keeps in territorial waters, most of the time, which is suspicious but means that boarding her would cause no end of a row with the dons. We don't want that at present."



NICK agreed. Britain did not want a quarrel with Spain just at present. The Maginot Line, Liège, Singapore, had demonstrated that the strongest fortress was not impregnable if attacked intelligently, from the right direction. Gibraltar taken or besieged, coastal batteries shooting from Algeciras, Tangier and Ceuta, would close the Mediterranean to the British shipping, further isolate Egypt and Malta.

"We know the manifest, sir," Barcey resumed. "But the *Luisa* docks in the military port, at Ferrol. That is not far from Bordeaux, where the Hun has a strong base."

"We'd have to be very sure, Barcey." The round man gestured. "And the French ship?"

"The sloop? She's quite in the clear, sir. We know what she takes aboard very promptly. And she no longer carries a seaplane, you know, which she would if—you see? In fact, I wonder, sir, if the plane was not ordered off to prevent her prying about on her way. Good patrol ship, somewhat heavy forward. About fifteen knots. But you've seen her, sir; she was stationed at Dakar even before the war. And you've seen her sister ship recently. The *Commandant Fluvier*, the Free French sloop which put in at Freetown a fortnight ago."

"I haven't a sailor's eye for ships, as you have, Barcey."

"Nonsense, sir. I've known you to name one of ours at sight."

"You tell me," Sir Andrew addressed Nick again, "that petrol for the planes is taken from the coast on camels. Seems a rather lengthy method, these days."

"The German I spoke with explained that, sir. The large plane, I believe it to be a Junkers, cannot take off very easily. They also feared it drew attention when seen too often. While camel caravans moving to and from the shore are not likely to be suspected."

"But they might be attacked by raiders."

"Raiding bands from the north are not large these days, sir. Limited to a score or so. Over that number makes for water shortage and very small shares of loot. There is small profit in stealing petrol out here. Mahoud, who organized the shuttle system, tells me he has twelve to fifteen men, each carrying a good rifle, with each caravan. The camels are good animals, better fed, frequently watered, while those of raiders are worn from a long, hard journey. So the caravans can outrun or outfight attackers, and would yield very small profit in case of success."

"The petrol is sent ashore from a submarine?"

"That is what I understood, yes, sir."

"Therefore, the spot where the petrol is picked up by the caravans must be near the meeting place of the submarines."

"Obviously, sir. I questioned Mahoud. But as I told you, he was suffering from fever. Nevertheless, here is what I understood: The petrol is cached on the beach, under sand. The exact location is not known to the caravan chieftain when he starts. A messenger is sent from a fishing settlement down the coast, and the caravan camps and waits for him."

"How does the messenger obtain his information?"

"Mahoud did not know, sir. Probably from Dakar."

"The petrol is no doubt landed during the refueling operations. It would help to know the date and place where the caravan picks up its loads."

"The date is between the seventh and the tenth, sir." Nick explained Ludwig's statement. "And, he said, can't be later than the tenth. The caravan cannot have reached the beach before the night of the sixth."

"Good." Sir Andrew nodded approvingly, and even Barcey appeared pleased. "But that leaves us with a hundred miles of coast to watch."

"Less than that, sir. The pick-up spot cannot be more than a day by camel from the camp of the cameleers. Say twenty-five to thirty miles in either direction. Probably less. At my request, Mahoud has arranged to send word to the caravan to signal their position—"

He explained the system. The others nodded.

"But if their plane is up, ours would be spotted. The submarines would have time to submerge. And by the time our surface ships arrived—"

"The supply-ship cannot submerge, sir."

"And that would be an excellent pretext for a visit aboard," Barcey announced. "I don't see, sir, how the Spaniards could protest very much if we found ammunition aboard. We would be further justified, because, if she is the *Luisa*, she would be far off her stated course. If we cannot do for the subs, sir, still we'd deprive them of fuel, torpedoes."

"I quite comprehend the possibilities," Sir Andrew retorted. "There remains the hardest task of all. To convince the Admiralty that our informa-

tion is accurate, to obtain means to do something. What with convoys and routine patrols, they're already busy enough. You will come to Freetown with me, young fellow. I'll need your testimony to obtain ships."

"I hoped you would allow me to fly with the bombers, sir."

"We aren't here for sport."

NICK was somewhat disappointed. He had counted on the trip ever since he had left Mahoud. The prospect had braced him during the long, hard hours on the trotting camel.

But another possibility of action had arisen, which he hesitated to mention. Nevertheless, it was best to voice his thoughts, even at the risk of ridicule. "Mr. Barcey, you remarked that the *Capitaine Duflos* and the *Commandant Fluvier* were sister ships."

"They are identical," the two-and-a-half-striper said. "Two thousand tons, three hundred and seventy feet in length, three five-point-fives. Built in the same shipyards, launched a few months apart."

"Same silhouettes? Same appearance from above?"

"Identical."

"So that one might be mistaken for the other?"

"Quite readily, yes."

"And the *Capitaine Duflos* is well known in these waters, to seamen and aviators?"

"I see what you have in mind," Barcey said, with a faint smile. "But the *Commandant Fluvier* must have left Freetown two days ago. Bound for the Congo, I believe."

"There's the wireless, sir."

"There is the wireless, quite right. But instructions can be intercepted, decoded. No, my dear fellow, I fear that the thought of a substitution is completely fantastic."

Sir Andrew coughed lightly.

"D'you know, Barcey, I was thinking that myself, yet your uttering the word convinced me. In the other war, our critics reproached the Hun with his lack of imagination and fantasy. At sea even more than on the land. They wounded the Hun, and he is making up for lost time now. He has been doing fantastic things—raining soldiers from the sky, overwhelming fortified lines in a week. Now, the Japs have caught it—a year ago, the thought that they might take Singapore by pouring an army the length of Malaya, through jungles, was fantastic. Really, I'm quite converted to the fantastic!"

"There'd be no end of formalities, you know." Barcey had picked up a pencil, was jotting down words—Juby, Freetown, Port-Etienne, and figures, without ceasing to speak. "Nominally, she's under control of the British Admiralty, sir. But the Free French can be so damn sensitive, we can't dispose of one of their craft without explanation. And once it is learned that we are interested in using her, the other side will start to wonder—"

"And not being set against the fantastic, they may guess, eh?"

"Quite right, sir."

"And they will not think it too fantastic, will they, to take heed and pre-"cautions. May I see that, please? Thank you—"

The round little man adjusted his glasses with a flick of the finger, read swiftly.

"Yes, it could be done, there is time. We must devise some method of picking up the signal promised by Mahoud. And we shall have some private means of communication. You have a wireless-specialist aboard, haven't you? Good. You have this young fellow's credentials from Free French Headquarters at London? He's detached on a special mission, of which this is a part. You'll need diplomacy and tact, M. Abdelnour, for we count on you to persuade the French."

"I'll do my best, sir," Nick agreed. "I don't think they'll be hard to convince, if there is any chance at all of action.

He produced the grimy identification booklet, laid it on the table.

"I shall not need this any longer. I think I've worn Boutros Abdelnour's luck very thin."

Sir Andrew smiled. "Very well, then, Lieutenant Nicolet."

## CHAPTER IX

### UNDER THE CROSS OF LORRAINE

ONCE more, time and distance had been juggled, scrambled, telescoped. Dawn was spreading over the rolling, gray-green sea; the oar-locks clicked rhythmically, the long blades dipped, the small boat bobbed towards the *Commandant Fluvier*, a few hundred yards away. In the distance, the plane piloted by Flying Officer Marlow was droning into space, wings gilded by the new sun to resemble a gigantic bug.

"*Souque, matelot!*"

The four French sailors stared at Nick as they rowed. He knew that he puzzled them. He wore a white naval uniform without markings of any kind, a peaked cap without a badge. The British flyers had treated him like a Britisher, yet he spoke French, city man's French. All four were Bretons, with the strong jaws, the stubborn brows and keen eyes of the breed. The white berets, ornamented with the scarlet *pompon*, seemed puerile and festive above those mature, tanned, rough faces. They wore short-sleeved striped shirts, duck trousers. Only the helmsman wore shoes.

Over there, the *Fluvier*, as these men called her, was pitching and rolling, had reduced her headway. Sooty smoke streaked the sky from her two stacks. She was weatherbeaten, could have stood a fresh coat of paint. But she flew the flag of undefeated Frenchmen, the blue Cross of Lorraine over the tricolor.

"How goes it with you?" Nick asked.

"It goes so-so, Mister," the nearest man replied. He spat politely over the side, grinned. "It's a long cruise."

"Oh, you'll see Keravel Street again!"

The ice was broken, and the sailors chatted readily. A man who knew Brest and Keravel Street was not wholly a stranger. They brought the boat to the bottom of the ladder. "Get up, monsieur, we'll take care of your gear."

"Careful, it's fragile."

"We saw that. Don't worry."

An officer in whites, wearing two stripes of gold on his cuffs, helped him to the deck, smiled, saluted. "Ensign Lerault, at your service, sir."

"Lieutenant Nicolet."

"I'll show you to the captain at once. Please follow me."

The *Fluvier* was already picking up her normal gait, the rolling lessened, but she still seesawed fore and aft. After climbing two companionways, the ensign knocked on a door, opened it and called out: "Lieutenant Nicolet, Captain." He gave Nick an undefinable glance, amusement, pity, gestured for him to enter.

The cabin was fairly spacious, well lighted. The sun caught on the dark, polished woodwork, flooded the bare steel bulkheads. Before a large desk, on which were piled blankbooks and papers, a sort of colossus was enthroned. He had a large head, covered with a fuzz of reddish-blond hair; a massive face, tanned the hue of freshly cut mahogany.

Nick tried to come to attention, to salute. But a pitch of the deck made him struggle for balance.

"Cut the ceremonies and sit down," a gruff voice invited him. "I'm Captain Brenheol. You have some damn papers for me."

"I'm Lieutenant Nicolet, Edouard, of the Air Corps, Captain." Nick settled down in a chair that was hooked to the deck. One of the man's enormous paws lunged at him and he fed it his right hand. "I'm enchanted to meet you."

"Of course, of course," Brenheol grumbled. He took the three enevelopes from Nick, swerved in his chair, tore them open. His coat was open over a sailor's striped undershirt and the four gold-braid stripes buttoned to his cuffs were rather greenish. His chest was huge, and his abdomen pushed against a blue sash wound about his waist. "What the hell is this? I talk English a bit, but I can't read it."

"There's a translation appended, Captain."

"A wonder they thought of that. They think everybody should speak their lingo." Brenheol shuffled the sheets, located the French. "Who's this Sir Andrew, anyway? He writes as if he had personally chartered this ship."

"I believe his position is explained, Captain."

"Yes, yes. And what about you? You're an aviator, aren't you, not a sailor?" Brenheol lifted one hand. "Oh, I know my catechism by heart—it isn't your fault. And I received instructions to listen to you, in code, if you please. So, I am not supposed to use the wireless unless you consider it urgent? Will I need your written permission?"

Nick stiffened. "No, Captain. I believe my word will be enough."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. But would you be so obliging as to inform me what this is all about? I get orders, in code, if you please, to come about and proceed northwest. I moved heaven and earth at Freetown to be sent north and they ordered me to the Congo. I must be dull, for I'm damned if I comprehend it."

"There are explanations in the letters, Captain. And the British will supply us with other details."

"Nice of them. What's this rigmarole about submarines and a supply-ship? If there was a chance of doing some good work, I know the British—they'd use their own ships, and I don't blame them. Yes, we have depth-charges aboard. Those I took out of La Rochelle in April 1940. What do they think I do with depth-charges? Eat them?"

Brenheol stood up, and to Nick's surprise, he was not a tall man. His giant's body was propped on short, thick legs. But he moved with astonishing agility for a man of his bulk.

"Come down to the mess room," he invited. "You think I'm a queer fellow, eh? You'll see. Every stranded colonial with a reserve commission thinks he should be an admiral in the Free Navy. This ship's a museum."

There were three officers in the messroom. They appeared like normal men to Nick, quite neat in their whites; the oldest, a two-striper, wore several decorations of World War I and the rosette of the Legion of Honor. Captain Brenhoel kept them from rising with a move of the hand, pointed to a seat. "Plump your stern there and eat. Gentlemen, here is Lieutenant Nicolet, of the Aviation, whom all on board this vessel will recognize and obey as an admiral. Introduce yourselves."

NICK found the French *aviso* a great contrast to the British cruiser. On His Majesty's ship, he had remained an outsider. Here he was known to all inside a few hours. The oldish officer with the rosette, who was the surgeon, showed him to a comfortable cabin. "You will like it with us. The captain's a phenomenon, but he's the most loyal friend—"

The young man in charge of the wireless room installed the set Nick had brought aboard, in the chartroom. The apparatus possessed a number of mysterious features, and the radio officer of H. M. S. *Bristol* had written instructions which the Frenchman understood; special filter, non-regenerative, and so on. The cruiser had to keep wireless silence much of the time, but her scouting planes were not subject to the rule. Barcey from the ship, or Sir Andrew from wherever he happened to be, could get in touch with their agent. Consequently, Nick spent his days in the chartroom and on the bridge.

West Africa was not far beyond the horizon, but most of the men wore no helmets. Somehow, those sailors trusted the sun at sea. Naturally, all combat stations were manned. Nick could look down from the bridge and see the crew of Gun Number Two—a fine, slender one hundred and thirty-eight millimeter—sprawled on the deck, moving with the shadow thrown by the gun shield, yarning endlessly, laughing very often.

The crew of the *Fluvier*, contrasted with the British on the cruiser, seemed casual, relaxed, noisy. Nevertheless, a definite shroud of gloom hung over the French sloop. The men talked and laughed, but sadness persisted.

Most of them were naval reservists from the Coasts. They had wives, children, parents in territory occupied by the ruthless Boche. For them there would be no letters, no packages, no news, until victory. They were not the heroes of a few minutes or hours of passionate combat but the heroes of enduring moral courage: Free French.

Two out of three were Bretons and Bretons, like the Welsh, love to sing. Their strong, melodious voices rose often as the *Fluvier* bowed and nodded in the swells, pushing north endlessly. Germany had made her bid for sea power so recently that almost none of the songs they sang referred to her as an enemy.

*"C'était un Anglais vraiment,*
*A double rangée de dents . . .*
*Un marchand de mort subite!"*
*(It was in fact an Englishman,*
*With a double row of teeth,*
*A dealer in sudden death!)*

The old chant, dating back to the eighteenth century, went on to relate the misadventures of a privateer, whose first prize was a cargo of rotting potatoes, the second loaded with carpet slippers and the third with fertilizer. And there were the songs of the Newfoundland fisherman, studded with profane English, with the shouted chorus in that tongue:

*"Haul away, haul away,*
*"Old fellow, haul away!"*

Bare-footed men with their trousers rolled up scrubbed and swabbed, polished and painted, as on all ships. The bells would strike, new faces appear on the bridge.

The first ten minutes of each hour, Nick would go into the chartroom, don the earphones, hoping to hear the signal meant for him. There was a babel of different voices, some remote, some startlingly near, metallic, irritated voices, metallic, pleasant voices: "Smoke zero-nine-five—smoke . . . Aye—are you coming in . . . I see Williams—" Flyers out of Freetown, out of Bathurst, out of Lagos, doubtless flyers from convoys trundling somewhere on the heaving ocean.

Up and down, up and down, on and on. *Fluvier* proceeding at thirteen point five, a crawl in comparison with a plane, a gallop in comparison with a camel. Somewhere northward, *Bristol,* which could pass thirty knots easily, submarines which knocked out sixteen under and twenty above, the *Luisa,* doing eighteen or better, seaplanes that touched three hundred miles, the Messerschmitts that could hit four hundred.

Then over the desert, the long file of camels, plodding, plodding, golden dust swirling as they lifted their flat hoofs, gravely turning in their league per hour, jaws moving, dreamy-eyed, satisfied and conscious of duty well done. Trotting northward along the beach, skirting the crashing rollers, a single rider dispatched by a mysterious will to find a cameleer and give him his destination. Trotting west from Repoux, another rider, with a verbal message from Mahoud to the same man: "Light two fires if ordered north, light three if ordered south."

NICK automatically consulted the chronometer as the message reached him at last, the afternoon of his third day on *Fluvier:* two minutes and fifteen seconds after two. It was the eighth day of the month.

"Hello Nick hello Nick all clear Nick. Are you there? Two pretty dark eyes for your blind date. Like old times, Nick—" It was Marlow's mate, the navigator, speaking. "Twelve below ten in. Lucille ready to leave home. Hello Nick—"

He thought of informing Captain Brenheol at once, and just at the moment, the commander came through from below, his cap askew, his tunic unbuttoned, a cigarette dangling from his thick lower lip.

"Commandant—"

"Later, later—it'll keep." Brenheol went into the pilot house, and the lieutenant on watch spoke to him. The captain then went on the bridge, walked about, stared at the sky.

Nick unrolled the chart, used the rule, measuring from the key word selected. His excitement was intense, his hands quivered, and it was some time before he was sure. The caravan was to call at some point north of the spot indicated by "two pretty dark eyes"—the fires. The meeting place of supply-ship and submarines would be within thirty miles, probably not more than two off shore.

Brenheol passed by again, going below. Nick spoke to him.

"Oh yes, good. Excellent."

"But, Commandant, there is bad news, the *Duflos* will leave Dakar tomorrow morning."

"I doubt that very much. Nothing we can do about it. Excuse me—" He brushed Nick aside and vanished.

Nick pocketed his precious slip, went into the pilot house. In answer to his question, the lieutenant indicated the barometer. It was sinking, that was undeniable. Nevertheless, there was work to do. Captain Brenheol could no longer have doubt. Feeetown had confirmed his credentials, then Brazzaville. The presence of the *Capitaine Duflos* in the same waters might complicate matters.

At three o'clock, he listened again, and the same voice repeated the same message. Nick was tempted to ask for more information, the *Duflos'* probable sailing time. But the chaps in the plane would not know. Sailors had come up and were stretching ropes along the bridge; others on the deck below were doing the same. A carpenter arrived, secured the ports.

"Storm coming, eh?" Nick asked him.

"Wouldn't be surprised," replied the man, a Norman. "Take a look at the sun."

Yes, the sun had turned strangely pale and flat for a tropical sun. And foam was whipping before the wind from the crests of the swells. In the lulls between gusts of wind, the atmosphere had become suffocating. And the sloop beat her hull into the flood with great, resounding smacks.

Then the stays started to whistle and shriek. The sky was growing dark, the sun's rays piercing through the clouds and lighting up patches of the oily sea that seemed to churn itself thick as tar. At four o'clock, Nick listened again, heard nothing. Nothing except vague cracklings and mutterings. The storm was coming from the north, and the planes must have been called in.

He went on the bridge, the spray lashed his face. Already, he had to shout. "How long do these storms last, Lieutenant?"

"Few hours or a few days," the other shouted back. He smiled, holding on to his cap, the damp whites whipped about him. "No danger—the *Fluvier's* seen worse."

The watch came up in oilskins. At five o'clock, hoping against hope, Nick listened again. Nothing. By that time, the sea was breaking down on the foredeck in great cascades. The crew of Gun Number Two had risen from the deck and was huddling behind the shield. Captain Brenheol noticed them, bellowed for them to go below. He returned to the chartroom, dripping.

"Don't have to worry about submarines for a while," he said. "Any guy that could aim a torpedo in this sea deserves to sink us. Let's see that slip, Nicolet." He scanned it, shrugged. "We're going away from it. But don't worry."

Nick wanted to protest, but the captain was gone already. He decided to visit the wireless room. The operator on duty, a youngster, was settled back in his chair, knees bent, feet braced, reading a book.

"Anything new?" Nick asked.

"No, Lieutenant." The lad laid the novel down, lowered one foot out of respect, kept the other one up for security. "Freetown will be on the air at six o'clock."

NICK wearily made his way back to the chartroom at six o'clock. He was rewarded by listening to squeals, whistles, ear-shattering crackles. A very faint voice murmured unintelligible words: "Mmmmmoo - ilyon - ummm - slot - ty - oummm—"

"The *Duflos* is leaving Dakar for Port-Etienne in the morning, Commandant."

"So you said. I know, I know." Brenheol brushed by. He was filled with blustering energy, was on the bridge, in the pilot house, in the chartroom. His rubber coat was as carelessly fastened as his tunic, beads of water glistened on his hairy chest. Nick had a definite impression that he was enjoying himself hugely.

"How are we doing?" Nick asked the lieutenant.

"Reduced to ten knots. Doing five, six at the most against this sea."

The *Fluvier* buried her rails alternately, the sea thundered on her decks in ceaseless cataracts. Although there was no use listening in before day, Nick made a hasty, uncomfortable dinner, went on the bridge in borrowed oilskins. The wind tore at him, the seas buffeted him, he discerned nothing save menacing surges crested with phosphorescent white, heard nothing save the roar of the combers and the monotonous shrieking clamor of the stays. The darkened chartroom was gloomy. He went below.

After midnight, one of the lieutenants came down; his face was drawn, as if the skin still puckered before the biting spray. "Not clearing up. Wind shifting all the time. There'll be hell to pay for some people in the morning. There's a convoy scattered all over the place. Got blinkers from four ships in two hours, merchantmen. If a submarine chances into the middle of that when it calms down, what a picnic! Eh, Nicolet, what are we going up north for, anyway?"

"Under instructions."

"Fine weather you got for us."

"Bah," another man put in, noticing Nick's annoyance. "He was praying to get out of the Gulf, to escape that Congo trip."

He went to his cabin and spent an uncomfortable night, braced with knees and elbows, shoulders and feet, as the sea attempted to toss him to the deck whenever he relaxed. At dawn, legs and arms aching, he was up in the chartroom for his first ten minutes of listening.

Brenheol tapped his shoulder. "Didn't you tell me they'd radio from a plane? They'd never launch one in this weather. Take it easy."

"Today is the ninth, Commandant."

"Yes. We're doing eight knots in the wrong direction, and damn glad of that, too! Go below and get breakfast."

The appalling silence lasted all that day. The ship's wireless caught the routine broadcasts, general news and orders, submarine warnings, but nothing addressed to Nick. There were many ships not very far off. He saw two during the morning, a third in mid-afternoon, wallowing in the west. The wind slapped down the smoke in long, feathery smudges, the craft appeared forlorn and defenseless.

When night fell without news, he was furious with despair. Granted that the *Luisa* could not have reached the meeting place today, she would be there in the morning. And the *Fluvier* was too far off course to make up for the time and distance lost.

## CHAPTER X

### ON THE TRAIL OF THE BOCHE

NICK was in his cabin, ruminating his gloom and disappointment, when a quartermaster pushed his head in, after knocking once.

"Lieutenant, the Commandant wants to see you in the chartroom."

"Coming."

Brenhoel looked at Nick with an undefinable expression, half amusement, half sarcasm. Then, grasping him by the arm, he took him before the barometer, pointed with his blunt forefinger. "See?"

"Yes, Commandant. Going up. But—"

"There was no use talking until it went up that far. Come."

He led the way to his private quarters. Nick sank on a settee, looked vaguely at the framed photographs fastened to the enameled bulkheads. Brenheol, swaying easily, produced a bottle of cognac from a locker, pushed a half-full tumbler into Nick's hand.

"Here's to you, my little aviator." He smacked his lips, went on: "No use even had you held a pistol to my head, had you had one. You see those pictures? My wife and three children. My home town was occupied by the Boche June eighteenth 1940. I know they're alive, or were a year ago. The British have bombed since. I won't see them again unless we win. When the Armistice was signed, I was at sea, free to do as I pleased. Some of my officers were for obedience. I decided upon going to a British port. I knew what I was doing and what it meant.

"Aboard this ship, there are men who escaped from France after the downfall. One of our officers came all the way from

Indo-China, crossing Africa. What France will do, I don't know. Defeat drives nations mad. But I don't permit you to doubt how we feel aboard this ship."

"Nevertheless, Commandant, I—"

"Shut up and drink. When you were born, I was already going to sea. So I know the sea. Nothing happens at sea that the sea doesn't allow. Usually, the sea is neutral. This time, she took our side. Our side, I tell you.

"To start with, the *Duflos* did not leave Dakar, because of this storm. And if I know anything of routine and colonies, she won't leave for a week. That worried me—two *Dufloses* forging up the coast, one following the other. The *Luisa* put out to sea, if her captain knows his business. That coast is not safe at best and in rough weather it's poison. That goes for the submarines, they wanted more room. And all the skippers, being seamen, did exactly what I did, nothing. There was nothing to be done so long as the barometer did not reach a given figure.

"And they all saw what I pointed out to you a few moments ago: it's going up. They did not meet today, and they won't meet tomorrow, either. Here's why. The swells from this storm will make a dangerous surf, on the coast. The submarines have to surface and come alongside the *Luisa*. Handling torpedoes, even in port, is a delicate business. The main hatches have to be open, and a submarine lies very low. Taking on oil in a rough sea is not so easy, either.

"I know this stretch of coast well; I was stationed at Dakar two years. I know just where our friends are likely to meet, north of Cape Timiris. They don't know about us and are in no particular hurry. They won't meet until the eleventh. Have a drink. Is that Sir Andrew a sailor?"

"No, Commandant, he is not."

"Then he just understands the sea and sailors by nature. There is a little sentence which few land people would have put in: 'This is the plan in general, to be modified by you according to circumstances and opportunity.' He realizes that you throttle a sailor with too precise orders, even in these days of wireless and steam. The sea is seldom what you expect it to be. I have thought of several things you did not consider, because you do not know about them."

"What have you in mind, Commandant?"

"Submarines, young fellow. I want to get one as much as you do. I'm not a religious man, in my life I've seen more bars than altars. But I'll make an offering at my wife's favorite shrine if we get one of the swine. It'll be the second—" Brenheol opened a drawer, fumbled through a litter of papers, handed Nick a yellowed paper. "November 1917, Channel."

Nick lifted his glass. "To the second, Commandant."

"Yes. As your British boss writes it: 'According to circumstances and opportunity.' Now, listen—"

"Yes, Commandant."

"We'll take it for granted that if the land forces have been ordered to look the other way, the naval forces have the same instructions. Which means that, up to a certain point, *they* won't worry about our presence nearby. But—"

THE *Fluvier* sighted the Mauritanian Coast, at a point some miles north of Petit-Portendik, at dawn of the eleventh. She turned north, proceeding with the shore six or seven miles to starboard.

Brenheol had issued an order that all officers and many of the crew should appear on deck wearing sun helmets. Regulations concerning that might be stricter aboard a Vichy ship. The anti-aircraft thirty-seven millimeters were manned, but the bigger guns seemed unattended. The sloop now flew the plain tricolor, without the Cross of Lorraine.

An atmosphere of intense excitement pervaded the whole ship now. The substitution of flags, the orders to prepare for combat, had let out the news. Nick noticed that the officers were somewhat nervous and pale. And he understood why. Captain of Corvet Brenheol had not told anyone whom they were to engage. And many feared that there would be a clash against a Vichy unit. But no one protested, all were ready to obey.

Brenheol was satisfied. He ruled his ship.

"Might as well pass the word that it's Boches we're after," he told his second. "Can't do any harm now."

The officer beamed and darted off. Nick imagined that he could feel the news racing from man to man to the depths of the ship: It's all right, we're after Boches.

At eight o'clock, he received a message: "Wonderful weather. Have you heard? Lucille staying home."

The planes were up again, and the sky was filled with chatter. "See soon—zero-nine-five—this is Pickwick. Red's dropping in—" and endless repetition of words and numbers. Nick had flown with the British for more than a year and had only a vague idea of the meaning. To a German listening in, those messages would be useless.

The rolling sea shimmered under the sun, empty, save for some small native fishing craft, large canoes and small *feluccas*, close to shore. And the further from Senegal, the rarer these would become. Gulls swooped and tumbled, flickering whitely across the cloudless blue.

On a trip below, Nick saw the crews of the forward one hundred and thirty-eight guns squatted in a passageway, waiting hopefully. They grinned at him, for they knew it was he who had summoned them to action.

A gunner called out: "Something serious, Lieutenant?"

"If it comes off, it'll be good."

"About time. Haven't fired a gun since Dunkirk!"

"And me since October 1918," an old seaman shouted.

Back on the bridge, Nick found Captain Brenheol pacing nervously, peering toward the coast. He had expected something to happen which was not happening, and he was angry. His immense patience with the sea was balanced by a great impatience with men. He had an odd, ludicrous trick of peeping above the glasses, as if they limited rather than helped his sight.

"Never failed, never failed," Nick heard him mutter to the officer on watch, Le Moing. "But this time it has to fail!" He swore and grumbled about tobacco-colored monkeys.

"Things may have changed, Commandant," the other replied stolidly.

"Brilliant, Le Moing, brilliant. Things may have changed!" He whirled about. "I don't want more than five men on this bridge. We look like a convention!"

Some time after nine, he showed satisfaction, his hand indicated something in the glare. "There!"

Ten minutes later, Nick discerned what he had pointed out, a small craft coming from the northeast, tartan rig, sail and jib. He examined her through the glasses. Perhaps forty feet in length, a deckhouse aft of the mast, four men aboard. Evidently a fishing-boat. He spelled out the name *L'Espérance*, and below it Ndiago, which he knew was a small village somewhere near Saint-Louis du Senegal.

"Le Moing, have a boat ready to lower. If she doesn't come alongside, we must go after her." Brenheol went to the engine-room telegraph and signaled for reduced speed. A ladder was lowered to starboard, and as the boat maneuvered to the side, a tall man stood on the roof, prepared to leap and come aboard. "Have him brought here!"

The captain signaled for normal speed, and the *Fluvier* steamed on, towing the boat. A white helmet came bobbing up the companionway, the fisherman appeared. He was very tall, very thin, a mulatto. He wore tattered trousers, a ragged shirt, and a very handsome gold watch on his left wrist. Manifestly, he had believed himself aboard the *Duflos*, and he stared from face to face with increasing bewilderment.

"WELL, Marcel, one forgets old friends?" Brenheol offered his hand.

"Lieutenant Brenheol! I beg your pardon—Captain." Marcel was recovering, smiling, saluting. "My compliments! When did you take over? I'd heard—"

"You heard right, my poor Marcel. I'll cause you a lot of bother. To start with, though, I'll buy your fish."

"You'll get a bargain, Captain," Marcel spread his hands wide. "I hooked a *capitaine* this big, must weigh forty pounds. And there's some good frying,

too. You won't bother me, I know, Captain."

"I'll have to requisition your boat."

"My boat, like Marcel Bienaimé, is at the service of France." The mulatto joined his bare heels, saluted. "First-class seaman in the reserve, ready for duty, Captain."

Brenheol smiled. "Good, good. But there are two kinds of Frenchmen now, and I don't want to get you mixed up. I'll sign you a paper that you and your men were taken by force. I'll put men aboard your boat, and if anything happens to her, you can make a claim later."

"Will there be danger, Captain?"

"Some. That's why—"

"Then I volunteer myself, my crew and my boat."

"You don't understand—"

"Yes, I understand." Marcel's teeth showed in a confident smile. "You're not for Vichy, you're Free French." He jerked a skinny, long thumb over his shoulder. "You're after the Boches out there. I reported them, three months ago to the Maritime Defense, and was fined five hundred francs for fishing in a forbidden zone. I was taken before an official who told me that if I spoke elsewhere, my accounts were as good as settled. I'm a Senegalese businessman, a French citizen. I've served in the Navy and I vote at elections. I was threatened!"

"I can't ask you to risk your life, Marcel."

"Nobody can handle my boat like me."

"And your men—"

"All three naval reservists, Captain. They know what's what."

"You have an auxiliary motor?"

"An old two-cylinder engine. But, being all ex-navy men, we keep it clean as a whistle. Six knots, easy, eight maximum."

"We'll give you fuel, Marcel."

"No need." The fisherman winked, nodded toward the shore. "The Arabs 'lose' a couple of drums, very cheap. Tank's full and I have a reserve. But the Government seized our one rifle. If there's fighting, you could give us four carbines and some cartridges."

Brenheol considered the lanky man gravely.

"I'm afraid rifles won't do much good. But I'll have them issued to you as a present. Tend to that, Le Moing." Brenheol took Marcel and Nick into the chartroom for a talk. He explained his plan in detail. "So you see, Marcel, you'd better stay here and let my men handle her."

"It's our boat, Captain."

"All right. I'll have a volunteer from my staff to handle the radio. There's somewhere to conceal him so that he can observe?"

"Yes, Captain. Square ports of the deckhouse, flush with the deck, almost. Your officer will be hidden. Yet he will see everything."

"Why not let me go, Commandant?" Nick asked. "There'll be nothing to do aboard for me." He indicated the radio. "The young radioman speaks fair English. He can report when it's safe to report."

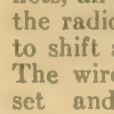
"Understood," Brenheol nodded, after a brief hesitation. "You rate the chance. But I hope you can swim."

"I can, Commandant. You don't need to worry."

"And as long as one of us is alive, you don't need to worry. We wouldn't let him drown."

"No heroics, eh? Overboard as soon as—"

"Yes, Commandant. I'll see the radiomen about the set for *L'Espérance*."



THE deckhouse of the small boat was not luxurious. The deck was littered with wet nets, buckets, pails and baskets, all smelling strongly of fish. Nick, the radioman and two of the crew had to shift a lot of cases to free the ports. The wireless expert installed the small set and its batteries where Nick, stretched on top of miscellaneous cargo, could use it without ceasing to observe. Brenheol came down in person to examine the preparations. He had five life-belts brought, which made the negro sailors laugh. What need was there for such things, within sight of land?

"Everything seems set," Brenheol approved.

"I've got to have some fish to show," Marcel said. "In case they do let us get near. We could put lines out, but we might get nothing. A basket of the small and two of the large will do."

"We'll give you back what you want."

They went back to the chartroom of the *Fluvier,* where the young Frenchman, who had listened at ten o'clock, proudly showed Nick a series of meaningless words. It was to be hoped that he spoke English better than he heard it.

"Do you know the *Luisa,* Marcel?"

"Yes." The Senegalese grinned. "She doesn't buy fish. Short-tempered guys in the crew, flourish guns at you. She's around a lot. I've seen her off Angre de Cintra."

A hail from aloft brought them to the bridge. The watch officer spoke over the telephone to the lookout. "Commandant, he reports plane in sight, from the south." They had scarcely reached the port wing of the bridge when they heard the throbbing of the motors.

Nick sought for the machine too high. It leaped into his sight suddenly, flying not a hundred feet above the sea. He recognized a familiar silhouette as it tipped over slightly passing by the ship, at an incredible speed. A wide span, comparatively narrow wings, two motors. It was a Messerschmitt, but not strictly speaking a pursuit plane, rather a long-range escort fighter. No national markings were to be seen on its silvery sides. Probably armed with two cannon and six heavy machine guns, a formidable opponent.

It hurtled north. Men poured out on deck, shouting their excitement. The men at the anti-aircraft were swinging their guns to bear. Then Brenheol's voice rose. "Get the hell out of sight! No firing without orders." He turned to Lieutenant Le Moing. "Pick out a couple of those fools and put them in irons. Sacred name of a pig! After all we told them!"

Nick stared after the machine raptly. This was his original game, what he had come from Europe to find. Not an hour before, that machine had left the sun-baked valley in the Kern el Nhas. At this very moment, its companion was warming its motors to replace it. And if he had been startled by its appearance, knowing what he did, how much more a British pilot on a routine scouting flight would be!

Out there, already miles away, the plane jerked about, returned. It had passed to port before and it passed to starboard now. At reduced speed, it seemed, for he had a glimpse of the men in the cockpit, but still flying very low. That pilot had nerve. The slightest mishap and he would strike the sea as hard as if smashing on concrete. But a low-flying plane is less visible from a distance.

It passed for the third time, directly overhead, so low that its belly seemed to scrape the masts. The roar of the motors was deafening. In two minutes, it had vanished, shrunk into the sky, leaving a trail of vibrations in the still air.

"Bombs?" Brenheol asked.

"No, Commandant. Scout."

"If he comes for another look, we'll know he smells something." Brenheol tightened his hands on the rail. "What turns my stomach is that he didn't worry about our shooting at him, because he thought this was the *Duflos.* That means all that gossip is true, that the Naval Mobile Defense at Dakar obeys orders from the Boches, or from their straw-men.

"How close is the tie-up? The British knew that the *Duflos* was not coming out. Does the guy in the plane know that; will he report our presence to the *Luisa;* will Dakar be informed and deny that the sloop is at sea? What do you think, Nicolet, should we barge in—or keep to the slower, surer plan?"

"Your plan still seems better, Commandant."

"Yes." Brenheol touched Nick's shoulder and grinned. "Give you some excitement, too, eh?" He looked long at the coastline, seeking landmarks. "That's Cape Timiris ahead. The swine are doubtless off the inlet, south of Tidra Island, where the sea is smoother. The *Fluvier* will steer straight for Port-Etienne, while you fellows go as agreed." He broke off, indicated the west. "There he goes again, but he doesn't seem concerned with us any more."

The Messerschmitt was streaking from north to south, skimming the swells. Then, even as they watched, it rose steeply, endlessly, higher and higher, until it vanished, melted in space. Nick imagined that the pilot's voice was clattering in a shack of the valley: "Dakar sloop continues on course. Nothing in sight. All clear."

That report was reaching the *Luisa*, probably the operators on submarines within a circle of four or five hundred miles. Would anyone listening know that the *Duflos* was at her moorings in Dakar harbor?

Brenheol had the same thoughts, for he telephoned the wireless room: "Report anything ususual, code or clear, immediately." He hung up and turned to Nick. "*Luisa's* still silent. Routine stuff from Dakar. Looks very good for us. Now, get started. No shaking hands and no wishes. Just—"

He concluded with the profane word that Frenchmen have come to consider a fetish for luck.

## CHAPTER XI

### STRATAGEM OF WAR

NICK once more was plunged into comparative inactivity.

He squatted on the deck of the small boat, smoking. The *Fluvier* was already several hundred yards away. Marcel, an oil can in one hand, was priming the motor of his craft, slowly, deliberately. Five carbines were concealed under sacking in the deckhouse, with packages of cartridges.

The negro helmsman was stretched flat on his back, arms shading his eyes, a leg casually hooked on the tiller. His two comrades, after lowering the sails, had perched on the gunwale and admired their captain at his work. Marcel walked round and round the ancient two-cylinder puffer like a voodoo doctor around a carved idol.

The three blacks of the crew knew that they were likely to be fired on. But if there was the least taint of worry in their minds, they were fine actors. They yawned, revealing splendid teeth, they scratched their thighs, they poked fun at Marcel, who was not the mechanic he believed himself. They were Ouolofs, and grafted on the impish nature of that breed were the irony of the French and the conceit of the sailor.

"I bet the third," he announced.

"I'll take four," another replied. The steersman spoke without moving. "I'll take six. Ten francs each, winner gets all."

Nick did not understand until Marcel, after tapping a pet-cock this way and that, picked up a heavy iron lever, the end of which he inserted in a socket near the engine. There was no fly-wheel, the bar was a vertical crank. The mulatto rubbed his hands, eyed his mates with scorn, pulled, as if he expected results at once. The others counted aloud.

The engine sputtered on the second try, again on the fourth, started on the sixth. The losers laughed. "Marcel and Diop'll split! It's a fake."

The steersman sat up, hooked an arm instead of a leg on the tiller. Marcel fiddled with the pet-cocks. He explained to Nick, an aviator, the mysterious peculiarity of engines. In truth, his was a stout motor, a robust motor. The first explosions frightened the gulls for a circle of a mile, then it settled down to a decent, normal beat. The mulatto indicated the low point of land to the northeast. "We'll round that in two hours."

"I could swim ashore in less," Diop boasted.

"Yes, and Mahoud ben Takoul's gang would take you for a slave. Although they couldn't sell you for much."

Nick realized that his good Moorish friend enjoyed fame in still another commerce. A negro slave, in good condition, was said to bring two hundred dollars in Rio de Oro. He looked at the shore, at the beginning of the endless Sahara. Black men sold as slaves on the ground, white robots piloting fast machines through the sky. . . .

He turned and sought the *Fluvier*. She was very far away.

"Lieutenant," Marcel said suddenly, "maybe it would be better if you got inside. They may have a lookout on land, this side of the point, with a telescope. If they saw a European—"

"Right, right."

Marcel followed him into the cabin and unfolded a grimy chart, a handsome job of engraving. It had been drawn by the Ordinary Geographist to the King of the French, and showed Mauritania as the Kingdom of Zanhaga. The depths were given in French fathoms as well as meters. About a hundred years old. Yet the Senegalese swore that it was more useful than the modern charts.

"That's where the ship will be," he indicated. "Four miles inside the point."

THE roar of the plane's motors took Marcel on deck, to hoist the French flag. Nick scrambled into the space between the cases and the roof. He saw the Messerschmitt flit by four or five times in quick succession. Probably, the aviators were wondering if they should not warn off this prowling craft with a few shots. The presence of the *Fluvier*, hull down on the northern horizon, probably prevented this.

"Things are spoiling," Marcel said, refolding his precious chart. Then he yielded to a revealing gesture. Instead of putting it back where he had found it, he slipped it inside his shirt. An instinct to save something. He loaded the carbines, broke open some packages of ammunition. After a glance at the shore, he shouted: "Starboard!"

"Starboard, Captain!" Diop echoed.

The boat tossed hard for a while, seemed to strike smoother waters, chugged on. Nick, flat on his stomach, propped up the oblong port, used the old telescope given him by Marcel. His angle of vision was somewhat limited, the mast was in the way, he had to squirm and twist from side to side. The fifty-caliber machine gun bullets would go through the timbers above him as through paper. He might die here, he thought, like a rat in a pipe.

There was a faint line on the left, which he presumed to be the distant beach of Tidra. The mast swayed, and suddenly his throat contracted. A ship, there was a ship. Approximately where Marcel had figured she would be. He tried to steady his glass. The mast bobbed back and forth like a windshield-wiper.

"Marcel!" he shouted. "A bit to port."

"Port," Marcel called back, and Diop echoed, "Port."

A great shadow swept across the sea at a dizzy speed—the plane. Brenheol had reasoned well, they did not dare open fire on the small boat while the Government sloop still remained within range.

He discerned the ship plainly now, stenciled against the buff of the coast and the blue of the sky. "She isn't the *Luisa*," he thought. He knew the silhouette of that ship; Lieutenant-Commander Barcey had showed him photographs, drawings. The *Luisa* was eight thousand tons, this vessel was not more than five or six. The *Luisa* was comparatively squat, with a stubby funnel. This one had a long black hull, white superstructure and a tall, slender stack. Resembled some English cargo-boats, yet flew the flag of Portugal.

For a dreadful moment, Nick thought the whole business had collapsed. Then he realized that no one had been sure it was the *Luisa* that brought supplies. Perhaps the Germans had even intended that vessel's suspicious wanderings to draw attention. Perhaps she had been a lure, a decoy, like *L'Espérance*.

There was a flutter at the wing of her bridge. Someone was signaling by hand. Probably warning the small boat to stay away. At the same moment, flags were run up, one blue with a St. Andrew cross, the other checkered blue and white. "What's M N?" he shouted.

Marcel called back: "Stop immediately. What do we do?"

"Signal you've understood. Shut off your motor. Starboard. I think I see something."

The ship was not anchored, probably kept slight headway, to counteract the swell. She was working, her booms were swung out, there were men at the winches. A number of people had gathered on the bridge, looking at *L'Espérance*. Too many braided caps and sleeves for a Portuguese tramp. Nick's glass kept steady as the boat came to starboard. His left hand reached out and switched on the radio.

"Hello. Hello. There's one of them

alongside, starboard. Another three hundred meters further toward shore. There may be a third. Small boats moving in and out out of my sight." He slipped the headpiece on. "Forward hatch on the one I see's open. Large boat alongside. Do you hear?"

"Got everything."

"Ship not *Luisa*. Portuguese merchantman, black hull, white, tall funnel, buff, masts buff. Can't see name. Camouflaged or painted over. Am about sixteen hundred meters away."

"Got it. Commandant authorizes withdrawal."

On the ship, the group had scattered. The same signal still fluttered: "Stop immediately." Nevertheless, Nick's mission was almost over, and it might be well to take a chance.

He called to Marcel, transmitted Brenheol's permission.

"I'll try, Lieutenant. But there's a launch cutting across to intercept us at the point. We'll have to fight."

"Try to stall. The sloop'll be here soon."

"All right."

Nick heard the sputtering as Marcel cranked. He wondered dimly if the crew was betting this time. He saw the stern of a submarine jutting beyond the ship's bow. The second sub he distinguished perfectly. He was almost certain there was a third, masked by the bulk of the vessel. Boats do not go and come from nowhere.

There was another boat, very small, almost on the creamy fringe, where the surf pounded.

Brenheol had been right, right in everything. When the plane had reported the approach of the sloop, presumed by the Germans to be the *Duflos*, the submarines had probably hastened to close hatches, had submerged. The charts showed one hundred and fifty fathoms in this bight. Once under the surface, they could move out to sea, and escape.

On the other hand, after the French sloop had passed the point, continued on her course, without visiting the suspicious ship lurking in territorial waters, they had felt safe and had surfaced again.

*The blacks stretched flat on their stomachs, braced their carbines on the rail.*

THE noisy approach of the fishing boat had lulled suspicions. *L'Espérance* was probably known to some of the officers on the supply ship, and no alarm had been felt until she rounded the point and nosed towards the inlet. The officers had been unwilling to submerge again, interrupt complicated operations, for a Senegalese fisherman. He could be ordered to stop, kept under observation, then released—or sunk at leisure.

From the number of officers on the bridge, Nick understood one thing: Some of the staffs on the submarines had taken the opportunity to have dinner in comfortable surroundings. What the Portuguese ship was called, where she had come from, how she had escaped being seen and reported, were questions that the British could probably answer. Her presence here demonstrated what Brenheol believed, that one was never certain of anything at sea. Probably she was provided with all necessary papers and seemed on a legitimate voyage.

"Hello. Have sighted tops of masts. Anything new?"

"Traffic seems to be speeded up a bit, but everyone's still here. We're trying to start motor. Launch is coming out to us."

"You are authorized to clear out."

"Many thanks."

The hull shook, as the motor caught. But instantly, a heavy machine gun opened fire. Nick saw grooves appear in

the deck, fringed with pale splinters. The motor died out, the firing also.

"Hello, there, who are you?" a strong voice hailed in French.

"You can read, *L'Espérance!*" Marcel shouted back. "I'm the master, Bien-aimé, Marcel. Why do you shoot at me?"

"You've been ordered to stop."

"By what right? This is a French ship, in French waters."

"What are you doing here?"

"Fishing. Do you want to buy fresh fish?"

"You're a hundred miles north of your fishing, fool!"

"Fool yourself! I've fished as far north as Cape Bojador. I'll report you to the Maritime Police." Marcel was superb. "You'll pay me damages."

"We're coming aboard. Stand by."

"By what right? You are not from a warship—" Marcel continued the argument, but he must have given a signal to his crew. The two negroes off duty crept into the cabin, picked up the carbines, stuffed clips into their pockets. Nick backed out of his hiding place, took a gun, and crawled out to join the two blacks, stretched flat on their stomachs behind the low rail. *L'Espérance* was swinging around, and from the roof of the cabin, Marcel took stock of the situation. He was protesting the boarding loudly. Then his tone changed, and he clamored: "Fire at will!"

The two Ouolofs rose to their knees, braced their carbines on the rail. Their captain had judged well; the target was there, not sixty feet away. The launch had a machine gun forward, handled by two men. Behind them stood some sort of a petty officer in a peaked cap, who had done the talking. There were two more sailors armed with rifles, a man at the wheel and a mechanic near the motor.

With both boats moving, bobbing up and down, it was rather like shooting the ball bouncing on a jet of water. According to rumor, Senegalese are seldom good shots. But the range was short, surprise was on their side. The machine gun fired a few shots, then the gunners were out of action. The riflemen were dropped soon after. Nick shot the petty officer, scoring a hit with the third try.

The others flattened at the bottom of the launch, and the bullets ricochetted from iron plates.

"Tactical withdrawal," Marcel howled.

He leaped for the starting lever, jerked it back and forth. Whether pure luck or warmed motor, the engine caught immediately, and the mulatto captain kicked the steersman back to his post. Diop protested loudly, as he wanted to join his comrades, who had opened fire on the merchantman, a good fifteen hundred meters away. The magnificently military words uttered by Marcel had impressed them, and they yelled like maniacs: *"Retraite tactique! Retraite tactique!"*

"Full speed ahead," Marcel, as captain, ordered himself as chief-engineer. The boat made for the point, knocking out all of seven knots. Nick hunched his shoulders high as he peered upward to search the sky for the plane. He could not see it; probably it was on the far leg of its ceaseless patrol. But it would show up before long.

A streak of spray slithered some distance ahead of the boat, a sharp boom shattered the silence.

"Small stuff," Marcel proclaimed. "Forty-seven at most!"

That was enough to sink his craft, but he felt he was worthy of heavier shells. The next one struck astern, skidded on the surface, bounced screaming over their heads, plopped into the sea four hundred yards ahead. Nick clutched the mast, as the cross-current caught the boat and rocked it like a cork.

The strange ship's funnel was smoking, the submarines were still in sight. Nick looked northwest and saw the smudge caused by the *Fluvier*. The trick was working; engrossed by the incident with the fishing boat, the Germans were caught. Perhaps they imagined that the French ship would drop the investigation of the shooting upon wireless orders from Dakar.

THEIR first warning that the supposed *Duflos* meant to fight came in the form of two spouts lifted a hundred yards short of the merchantman. From then

on, short, pale orange flames flickered ceaselessly forward on the *Fluvier*.

The mystery freighter moved away. Nothing was in sight beyond her save abandoned small boats, barrels and crates. The sloop's long-idle one hundred and thirty-eights were in action at last. Spouts rose and fell in rainbows of spray close to the Portuguese. Things were happening to her funnel, to her bridge. At irregular intervals, brilliant flashes spread like stars; yellow, white and black smoke bloomed, shredded.

Her mast went overboard in a jarring explosion. But she fought back, and she proved to have guns larger than the forty-sevens scorned by Marcel. One hundred and fifty caliber guns, judging by the heavy detonations. She slid between *L'Espérance* and the *Fluvier*, and there must have been plenty of power concealed in that black hull, for her nose was buried in foam and she sped by like a locomotive. She had several small fires aboard, trailed smoke all over the sky. Marcel had left the motor, Diop the tiller, to shoot at her, but no one had time to return the small boat's fire.

She made for the open sea as if all hell was on her tail. But when the *Fluvier* refused to be lured in pursuit, she swung north to keep in contact and continued the fight. She had small hope of victory or even survival, since her presence was reported. She was trying to keep the sloop from attacking the submarines.

But Brenheol was a stubborn Breton, not easily excited or fooled. The first depth-charges rolled off his ship's stern as Marcel's boat rounded the point. The *Fluvier* had reached the spot where the strange ship had been seen first, and proceeded in a spiral from it.

This disturbed her fire control. Her main guns were swung to port and only fired at intervals, at a range of four to five thousand meters. Every few seconds, somewhere near, a German five-point-nine kicked up a geyser. So far, she had escaped serious damage, although a stretch of her boatdeck had turned to twisted, smoking wreckage. Whether by inattention or intent, she still flew the plain French flag.

As the loops of her spiral grew wider, the charges were primed to explode deeper. The small boat shook, Nick could feel the tremors through his body. The *Fluvier's* small anti-aircraft guns, her machine guns went into action as the Messerschmitt flew above her.

Around Nick, the Senegalese howled with excitement and pleasure. They fired their few remaining cartridges at the machine. The pilot must have been a cool veteran. He knew that without bombs he could do little harm to the ship, so he concentrated on the crews of the larger guns. A half-dozen times, Nick thought he had crashed on the deck, only to see him hurtling upward again, in the flecks of exploding shells. Then he must have run out of ammunition, for he headed for land, flying very low, very fast.

At last the *Fluvier* headed for the open sea in her turn. And the burning ship in the distance took flight. The sloop passed a few hundred feet away; Nick discerned someone waving from the port wing of the bridge. He lifted his sun helmet, and shouted back.

"What luck? What luck?"

He could not understand the reply, and before he could make himself clear, a bump knocked him off his feet. The boat had scraped a rock or a sand drift. This sent Marcel and his men into new activity.

"Where to, Lieutenant?" Marcel called.

"Let's go over there and take a look —it's safe!"

THE cannonade was receding northward.

Nick went into the cabin, remembered the radio. He crawled to it, picked up the phones. "Hello, Lieutenant Nicolet here. Hello, do you hear me?"

"Where have you been? Calling you last twenty minutes."

"Well?"

"The Commandant wants you to know he's sure we got one. Maybe two, maybe three. Can't be sure. But one, sure. Wants to tell you he'll get the slob we're after before long. She's slowing down a lot, and she'll never make Cisneros. Two English destroyers north of us by now—"

"Fine. What's the breakage?"

"She's hit us twice. Three killed, two wounded. The swine in the plane killed two more at Number Two, one on the bridge. Lieutenant Le Moing is wounded."

"Any instructions?"

"Hold it. I'll ask the bridge." There was a pause of two minutes: "Commandant says you're free to maneuver for the best. If he can't come back for you, says he makes a date with you—champagne supper, in Paris, soon as possible."

"Tell him I said thanks a lot."

He switched off the radio after a few more words. In the open again, he started north. The freighter was out of sight, but the *Fluvier* was there, very small, smoking and flickering as she shrank into the sunlight.

"There's a lot of oil," Marcel said.

"They're sure they've got one."

"Falibe, get a hook and try to get something," Marcel ordered.

There was considerable debris floating about, but Nick could not be sure whether it was some of the stuff abandoned in the emergency dives or floated up from a burst submarine.

"How far can you go in this boat, Marcel?"

"Any place. Why?"

"Could you make Freetown?"

"Sure." Marcel lifted his bony shoulders. "I'd better not show myself in Dakar for a while, anyway. We've got water, sacks of rice, and we can fish." He contemplated Falibe's efforts to pull a case alongside through narrowed eyes. "You don't have to fret about the maritime patrol. They're anti-Boche. What you got there"

The Ouolofs hoisted the case aboard. It contained biscuit-tins. A keg contained rum, which was no use to the crew, all Moslems. But this was a new sort of fishing and very interesting to them. So that the plane swooped on them by surprise.

The motors were turned on at the same time as the shooting started, and the combination was terrifying. It was much as if five hundred sledge-hammers had smacked the boat in five hundred places at once. The mast split, collapsed, lead ricochetted from the motor. The giant shadow flashed by, the silvery machine slid over the sea, turned.

"Overboard!" Nick shouted.

He led the way by a full second, sank, rose swimming, spitting and half-blinded by the smear of oil. He saw his helmet floating upside down, shoved it on his head. He remembered husky Ludwig all too well. The plane was near again, filling the universe with thunder. Nick could see the flashing of the tracers, distinguish the shattering of timbers through the explosions.

"Marcel! Marcel!" he shouted.

The plane was overland again, but his ears still rang. Thin and clear, at his very shoulder, Marcel answered: "Present, Lieutenant. Need anything?"

"Where are the others?"

"Right here."

Nick paddled about, and saw three woolly black heads, each one split by a grin. They surrounded a life buoy, marked in neat stencil: *Commandant Fluvier, La Rochelle.* And across that float were laid four of the five carbines. A good carbine is worth money.

"Hang on to Diop if you get tired," Marcel said. "He's strong and the best swimmer." He kicked to raise higher in the water. "My boat's going down. Those little guns can shoot, eh?" He must have had a red-haired father, for his damp, kinky hair had a coppery glint. "Think I can get an indemnity after the war?"

"Maybe before. Brenheol will report commandeering your boat."

"No. I volunteered, remember? Does that make a difference?"

"I don't think so."

The negroes, who had swum as early as they had walked, were as at ease in the water as on the beach. Falibe, whose calf had been cut by a bullet, stretched on his back, holding the leg above the surface while his comrade bandaged the wound.

"Are there any sharks around here?" Nick asked Marcel, thinking of the blood.

"Yes," Marcel said, with utter seriousness. "But you don't have to worry. They'll go for a black man first." He started to laugh. "And they're not

around now. Look at all the dead fish. Explosions scared them all away."

"We better get to shore," Nick suggested.

"Oh no," Marcel protested. "The Moors would get us."

"It's all right. I know Moors."

"So do I, and I'm half-black. A captive, an *abid,* a slave."

"We can't stay here."

"There's a couple of small boats. We'll get one and bail it out." Marcel leaped up to orientate himself. "On the left, maybe five hundred meters. Don't forget, if you get tired, hang on to Diop."

"I'm all right. Go on."

NICK was a good swimmer. But the four Senegalese passed him with ease, even the two who were pushing the life buoy. The sun gleamed on their naked shoulders, they smiled and talked loudly. They heard the plane overhead several times, then all was quiet, save for the lap-lapping of the waves and the distant smashing of the surf on the beach.

Halfway, they came to a long pole, perhaps eight inches in diameter, a spar probably, a boom knocked off the ship by a shell. Marcel slapped one hand on it and declared it should be taken along —it could float. So all helped push it. Nick was the end man.

Yet, some minutes later, he was aware of someone behind him, puffing hard. He held on with both hands, turned. Two hands were clenched on the wood, a head bobbed not a yard away, a round, unsightly head, black and greasy. Nick was so startled that he automatically pushed the fellow by the shoulder.

"*Nien, nein, Kamerad! Ich bin sehr schwach! Bitte, nein—*"

"*Seien Sie unbesorgt,*" Nick urged. "Don't be afraid."

"What's that? What's that?" Marcel cried.

"I've got a German here," Nick explained. He was somewhat worried about the Senegalese's reaction. "He says he's very weak."

Four faces turned toward Nick and his companion at the end of the timber. Four faces, serious for a moment, then grinning in full realization.

"A prisoner," Marcel announced. "We've taken a prisoner!" He dived and came up on the other side of the German. "Tell him he's our prisoner, Lieutenant."

"Yes, yes," the other agreed. "Prisoner, yes. I speak French. Yes, monsieur, a prisoner."

Marcel clutched him around the body, heaved him to a secure position astride the float. "Hold on there, prisoner." And he swam to resume the lead.

"Were you on a submarine?" Nick asked.

"Yes, a submarine, yes."

"How many were here today?"

"I only know of mine. So, the Frenchman was sunk."

"No. We are from a small boat."

"Ah, yes, the small boat. You shot the people in the launch."

"So you saw. You must have been on the second submarine. There was one alongside, wasn't there?"

"I do not remember. My head hurts. I'm thirsty."

"How did you get here? Left outside. . . ?"

"No. Inside, under the hatch. There were explosions. Then the water came in. Then I was swimming."

"Your boat was sunk?"

"She was sunk. Must be. I was inside, and I am now here."

They had reached the nearest small boat. The blacks were bailing out water. The prisoner was hauled in. He was stark naked. Diop, at Marcel's suggestion, made him a turban out of his trousers.

"My boat's still floating," the mulatto remarked, standing up. It was true, the hulk of *L'Espérance* had settled almost to her deck, but she had not sunk. "Get some oars, we're going back."

Obediently, the crew dived overboard and found two oars.

Ten minutes later, they were on the boat's deck, the dinghy moored aft. Falibe went into the flooded cabin, passed out a keg of fresh water, some food, and a sodden sun helmet for the prisoner. He was given a share of everything, had wiped some of the oil from his face, but still refused to answer general questions.

Nick had reasoned that the plane which had wrecked their boat had come to replace that which had spent its ammunition on the *Fluvier's* gun crews. Neither machine was in sight. The sea was deserted, nothing moved ashore.

"Think we can bail her out?" Nick asked of Marcel.

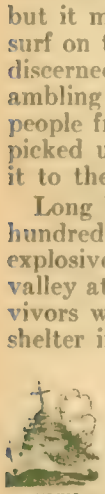
"No. She's not floating. She's on a sand bank. Deep water on either side. She'd founder in three minutes. Can you use the radio, Lieutenant?"

Nick stripped, went into the flooded cabin in his turn. The water was two feet from the roof. Reaching the set at the cost of many contortions and bruises, he found it dead. But he returned with the telescope, found where he had dropped it.

He scanned the horizon for a long time.

Nothing on the sea. He imagined that he could hear a vague rumble of guns, but it might have been the beat of the surf on the coast. On land, very far, he discerned a string of camels, a caravan, ambling along a crest. Undoubtedly the people from the Kern el Nhas, who had picked up their petrol and were taking it to the valley.

Long before they sighted the peak, a hundred miles away, a storm of steel and explosives would have blasted the little valley at the Kern el Nhas, and the survivors would have had to flee and take shelter in the native camps.



MARCEL was directing salvage operations. The men brought up tools, hammers, saws.

"What are you going to do?" Nick asked.

"Get away from here. We'll fix a mast and sail on the little boat. And go out to sea."

"We're safer here, Marcel."

"Oh, no, Lieutenant. The wireless will have worked, and the *Capitaine Duflos* will sail tonight to investigate. She will be here around eight tomorrow morning."

"But you said they wouldn't—"

"If they take us aboard, they'll have to report finding us. That means the Maritime Tribunal for me and my men. Twenty years' hard labor for me, eight apiece for them. Of course, we would be freed when peace came, but it might be some time. And there is the shame of prison to consider. To the Tribunal, we could not say we were forced. And there is this man—"

"What of him?"

"He saw us fire on the launch." Marcel sighed. "He is a prisoner of war, his person is sacred—" Unconsciously, he repeated the terms of military instructions. "So we cannot shut his mouth by killing him. We rescued our own accuser."

That was the truth.

"It won't be long before we are seen by a British ship."

Nick nodded agreement. But he did not feel very cheerful. The little craft, loaded down with six men, water and food, would be unwieldy. In any kind of a sea, she would capsize, founder. And the *Fluvier* could not be expected back for a long time. She was chasing her target north towards Cisneros.

"Ho—there—" It was the prisoner, whom they called Fritz by now—he would give no name—who attracted their attention. He was pointing southwest.

"Planes," Marcel said. "Three planes."

Three dots, blurring in the sunset sky. They were heading for the point, flying high. Two of them started to circle at the same altitude, the third came lower and lower. Nick picked up one of the carbines, held out his hand for cartridges. Marcel hesitated, then reached in his pocket.

"Why? They're British."

"Just to signal—" Nick loaded and fired, loaded and fired again.

The machine, a large seaplane, swerved some distance, came down in a beautiful glide, settled on the surface easily. From then on, it lost all grace and waddled like a duck. With an intermittent roar of motors, it crept near the stranded boat.

There was a flash of reflected sunlight as the bow turret was opened. A helmeted head appeared, a gloved hand waved.

"Ahoy, there?"

"Ahoy!"

"Anyone there by the name of Nick?"

"I'm Nick."

"Ah, really. We're to take you back. Can you swim over?"

"There are six of us."

"I say, that's too many. Destroyer should be along soon."

"We'll wait for her."

"Are you sure? Oh, right, right. What shall I say? I mean, haven't you some sort of message? We were to pick you up, you know."

"We've got a prisoner, tell them that."

"A prisoner?"

"From a submarine."

"Bring him along. We can take him."

Marcel touched Nick's arm. "Our prisoner. He stays with us."

"He'd rather stay here," Nick called out.

"No accounting for taste. Well, we have to go—"

"Did you hear anything?"

"About the doings this afternoon? Rather!"

"What happened, do you know?"

"Oh, the Frenchie knocked the ship about to start with, and one of our heavies was in for the finish. She's sunk. Really, you're sure it's all right for you to stay here?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Must go. Ta-ta."

The seaplane sputtered, wallowed about clumsily. Then she gathered speed, skimmed the surface, lifted and was off. Before long she was heading south, with the two others.

"What happened to our ship?" the prisoner asked.

"She's sunk."

"So he says," the fellow grumbled. But he believed the news, for he appeared very dejected, and sat on the roof of the cabin with his head in his hands.

"What did he want?" Marcel asked a moment after.

"Asked if everything was all right. A destroyer's coming here to look for confirmation. Should be along in a couple of hours. She'll pick us up."

"I understand English." Marcel offered his hand. "You wouldn't leave us. You know they need you and will come for you, while we might have been forgotten."

"You're crazy, Marcel."

"Then why did you stay, if not for us?"

"I don't know," Nick declared sincerely.

Now that rescue was sure, the negroes had stopped work. They sprawled on the deck and waited. The prisoner sat aside, brooding and sullen. A great peace had settled over the darkening sea and the whole sky was like lavender silk.

The destroyer would come soon. Before morning, Nick would be able to ask someone, somewhere, for a chance to go with the raiding planes. It would not be a combat, really, but an execution. His mission was over, but having been in at the beginning, he wanted to see the finish, out there in the Kern el Nhas.

# LAUGHING BONES

By

PAUL ANNIXTER

ILLUSTRATED BY LYNN BOGUE HUNT

96

IT WAS just turning dusk and the stunted palms that bordered the miniature lake—the only waterhole for miles around—cast spooky shadows along its marge.

Something moved abruptly down a shallow brush-grown *walla*. A small humped form flitted out from a clump of javelin bush, paused a full minute gazing toward the waterhole, and melted away again. It was nothing—only old Bones, the spotted hyena—a beast of no account at all, neither jackal nor Cape dog, and regarded with contempt by all other animals.

Unsavory, down-at-the-heels, ungroomed, with brutal immense jaws and bristly mane, Bones' heavy shoulders sloped back into an absurdly weak stern. Ochre-gray coat sprinkled with dark spots arranged anyhow and looking rough and mangy like something long dead, and the dark scowling visage of some fiend from the nether world—that was Bones, chief undertaker of the waste, boycotted by the rest of the desert wild.

Down toward the waterhole it was so very still and shadowy that he was virtually certain that some of those shadows were animate. He could almost feel the listening, waiting tension in the air, but for the life of him he could not be certain what the shadows that faintly moved—as distinct from the shadows that did not—might be. He had an overwhelming urge to conclude that all of them were teeming with life and streak for the open plain.

Old Bones felt it terrifically as he prowled hump-shouldered in the brush. But he also felt something else that gripped and drew him to the waterhole—something very much in his line—namely imminent death. And not even the jackals or the vultures were his superiors in sensing dark things about to occur. He analyzed the breeze, but it had shifted and begun to blow the wrong way. Hearing was out of the question. So he lingered on, like a creature in the throes of some fearful torment, pulled by invisible cords toward the blackness beneath the palms, jerked by equally invisible wires away from the dread spot. Indeed, he seemed in actual danger of being finally torn in two, as he wove his demented pattern in the sand—a pantomime of hunger, lust, curiosity, caution and sheer, slavering fright. A dozen times he lurched toward the mimosa shadows, a dozen times his indecision flung him back from some danger his fancy had conjured up.

But this was only Bones' invariable mode of procedure. Never any doubt about which impulse would finally win. Hunger, his famishing, insatiable, hyena-

*The meat went aloft with the cat, though how the beast managed the climb was a miracle.*

hunger, gnawing ever at his vitals, was the ruling force within him—the curse that dooms all those who live on carrion to be consumed by famine. And hunger always won, sent him lurching in, desperate at the last.

TONIGHT Bones was ravenous even for a hyena, tormented as by the thirst that follows famine, or carousal, for he had had to give up the bulk of his scavengings for a week past for certain specific reasons—three of them in fact—that whimpered back in his ill-smelling den in a deserted jackal's burrow. He was, in short, so nearly mad with hunger that he snapped at branch and leaf in passing, with the glare of insanity in his eyes.

He was just about to brave the unknown and melt into those shadows when an agonized scream cut the dark. Bones doubled on his tracks and erased himself like blown ashes, as the shadows gave up their secrets and the secrets streaked for the open. One, two, three, four of them raced past. Three were zebra; the other, disappearing in long airy bounds, revealed itself by laid-back horns against the sky to be an antelope. One other followed to the edge of the shadows, choked incontinently and fell over on its side, quite dead, while above or behind it, two pale green lights floated for a moment. Then the carcass of the dead beast—it was another and smaller antelope—was dragged back out of sight.

"*Who-eee O-oww-aaa.*"

A harsh bass reverberating cry, ending in a tortured shriek, followed hard by the gurgling of something in death throes and a fiendish low chuckle, set the entire night on edge as if a grounded wire had poured an electric fluid into the air. This was followed by another piercing shriek, worse than the first; and then peal upon peal of the most demoniacal, depraved, diabolical laughter. That wasn't the unseen killer in the shadows, it was Bones, all wrought up and excited now and wondering whether the young male lion who had made the kill would drag the carcass up into the crotch of a tree as he sometimes did, and cheat Bones and his family of the remains. The outburst was also a hurry-up signal for reinforcement, and presently it came in the form of another humped and slinking form—Bones' unsavory son on whom Nature had played a prank by giving him an almost albino coat of spectral gray.

They snapped at one another in passing; in fact, the two were at dagger points except on rare occasions like this, each deeming the other superfluous in a preserve that had been lean before the son matriculated. However, they pulled together now, particularly vocally, setting the night on edge for they feared their poor relations, the jackals, might trick them of the feast. Faint sounds apprised them of the progress of a banquet—the occasional snap of a bone, a soft and horrible purring and worse than these, an occasional windy sigh of repletion.

Old Bones knew the banqueter well, being his vassal, for Leo Rex was top tyrant of the district and the hyenas followed him. They had to follow something.

Bad news was presently telegraphed by the rasp of claws on bark. They knew by the labored sound that the meat was going aloft with the cat, though how the beast managed the climb was a lasting miracle, for even the remains of the kill would have weighed as much as the carcass of a goat. But the feat was done at last and the killer emerged from the shadows and made off with many a lambent and dirty look to rearward. Bones and son gave him a royal escort to the open desert to make sure he was well home, then back full speed to the place of shadows.

The scrub palms were haunted by squeaking bats as the hyenas circled beneath the cached kill, licking insanely at the spilled blood and making mighty leaps at the dangling carcass. Nearly an hour passed thus, during which time three jackals joined them and the lot of them wailed and laughed and groaned as they cruised the shadows like prowling sharks about an open boat. Then a gibbous moon rose, all coppery from the horizon and accentuated that grim spot by its partial revealments.

"God!" said a low voice on a brush-grown ridge a thousand yards distant. "What a beastly row! But at least that settles it for tonight. Nothing else could be near the waterhole with those beggars about."

"Right, sir."

"Send the word back, Sergeant, then come along."

The young British sub-lieutenant groaned softly as he stretched his aching limbs, stiffened and cramped after hours of crouching and waiting. The sergeant signaled back with extended arm to the waiting field telegrapher below, and the telegrapher flashed the message *All clear, no enemy in sight* to the general at headquarters a mile and a half away. Then the sergeant crawled down the sandy slope after his superior. Both were dressed in desert kit, consisting of pith helmet, shorts and leggings. They did not rise to their feet till they reached a brush-grown *walla* and then they moved with utmost caution, bending low and wending their way through abatises and espaliers of three-inch thorns.

"Four nights of this," muttered the sub-lieutenant as they tramped through muffling sand still scarcely cool from the sun of yesterday. "I hope that satisfies him."

Soundless as the movements of the two men had been, their departure was sensed by the yapping throng at the waterhole, not by sound or scent surely, but through some super sense that man has lost. Abruptly, all in an instant, they had dispersed like the fragments of a burst shell. Dispersed with a careless speed that almost lost them the meal fate had decreed for the night—a lame caracal, a strange beast like a spare, smooth-coated lynx—creeping down toward the water.

Cornered, frightened out of all its nine lives, it was overrun by a yelping wave and the feeding that followed was delirious and unconfined. Leg bones were crunched as a man would chew toffee. Hide, hair and tendons all disappeared. Bones, in the center of the mêlée got away with part of a leg. Out across the sand he streaked, dodging through thorn bush, and that he did not pause to bolt an extra mouthful must be held to his everlasting credit when you are cursing him and his kind as vermin or worse. Down a dried-up water course he slipped and appeared with only a rustle to announce the fact at the hole-mouth of his domicile.

A throaty snarl was his greeting, followed by a few weak helpless whimpers from underground—voices of three five-day old hyena whelps. A black blunt muzzle, duplicate of his own, was thrust into the open, jaws snapped and the offering was snatched out of sight, as a treasure would be wrested from a thief. Bones backed meekly off and lay down. There was an infinite and terrible appeal in this despised and degraded creature striving to be chivalrous.

During this period of weaning the litter, Bones had no family life. He was barred from the den and functioned only as watchman and bringer of scraps. Most husbands of the waste left home during this interval, but the hyena, moth-eaten and dilapidated though he is, excels in fatherly instincts.

Back by the waterhole Bones' fellow ghouls continued to match groans, howls and gibbers, their chorus rising and falling like a fevered pulse. Then the night wind got up, kicking the sand before it —rarely a night that it didn't blow—and Bones got up with it. Hunger had renewed its grim attack; the scrap or two he had bolted had been only an aggravator.

For a space he ran about in a daft manner alternately rearing and pivoting in air with upthrust snout and backward flung head. He was getting the feel of things by animal radio, as it were, and presently he was off again, a haunted and harried form threading the mysterious desert waste. Because of his humped shoulders, long forelegs and swinging, down-hung head, he appeared to be forever rearing into the air and at the same time sinking into the ground—a startling spectacle.

Something drew him now off across the shimmering moonscape, far beyond his usual range. Over a mile he traveled at his weird loping gait, a bit surer each moment of his direction, and of why he

went. Something beckoned out there—a promise yet still a menace for all was patently not quite right with the wild here and hereabouts. Everything Bones met seemed to be creeping abroad with finger to mouth, as it were, and refraining from crossing the open places.

TWICE he barged into some familiar enemy—he had no friends — scuttling obviously fear-ridden in the opposite direction. First it was a down-at-the-heels jackal of the black-backed variety streaking low to the sand and quite blindly, for it almost ran head-on into Bones. The other was an old caracal cat—a grim character not given to panic, who ran for nothing but men and guns, as Bones well knew. And yet—Bones pressed on. Something had to be done about that terrible hunger within him, for Bones, like any army, marched on his belly, when all was said and done, and the past week had been like a retreat from some scorched earth area.

Abruptly then, Bones brought up all standing where a winding trail debouched from the thorny brush. He had to or be torn to pieces by wild dogs. Five of them, lean spectral forms, with round pricked ears, humped shoulders and long legs, were just emerging from the brush, tongues lolling, evidently returning from a night's hunt. African wild dogs, however, are never too tired or replete for one more kill. They are specialists in cruelty and quick death and will eat anything that prowls—even a hyena.

Dancing and chattering like mad gnomes, they wheeled as one beast and swept down upon Bones. He ran then, as he had seldom run before, the five dogs spread out yapping behind him, ever equidistant, as if tied to him by invisible cords. And then—another of those quick shifts behind the scenes that keep the nightly drama of desert life anything but monotonous. That call which had been but a mere whisper in the ether to Bones, became all at once a clarion cry. From close at hand, just ahead in fact, the night air had brought him the scent and the sound of horses—and of men!

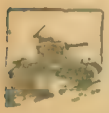
In full flight Bones put on the brakes—he was streaking up a sandy bush-grown slope at the moment—and shot off at a sharp angle to his original course. The wild dogs followed suit, and an instant later all were racing full speed back the way they had come, the dogs leading, old Bones apparently in hot pursuit.

The British general received the all-clear message regarding the waterhole at his headquarters a mile and a half away. The word went round and every officer in the detachment immediately stood by awaiting the expected order to advance. But the general merely sat for a time at his table studying a topographical map of the surrounding country. He was a seasoned old Africander, that general, and a few years before he had hunted game through this very region. He knew the only other route by which a mechanized enemy could penetrate the region undetected. So instead of giving the word to advance he called in his aide and the field telegrapher and set off across the moonlit sand to reconnoiter. So it was that from behind a ridge of sand two thousand yards away he was a witness of the strange actions of old Bones and the wild dogs.

Had Bones and the pack gone on over that ridge undeterred, the general would have returned to his skirmish lines and given the awaited order. But a hunter learns a thing or two about the movements of wild life. And when the hunted in full flight turns sharp around and pursues the hunter, for no apparent reason, then it is high time to have a look round about and over the horizon for causes. Something in the way of a major terror lay just over that ridge and the general could guess pretty well what it was, knowing the lay of the land. Still, he had to be sure. He waited on.

And now was to be seen something of the inner workings of old Bones, that beast of weird extremes of abject cowardice and sudden erratic nerves. The wild dogs had sped on and out of sight. Bones stopped within a thousand yards—and turned back, relapsing somehow into the landscape as if he had never been. When he reappeared in his drifting spooky fashion it was near the top of the bush-grown ridge from which he had

fled, overlooking a great depression in the desert floor. A dry riverbed gleamed palely below, fringed with dwarf palms, and along its winding course sprawled a great encampment of men and horses, and beyond these, squat armored monsters that were engines of death and destruction.



THE moon had dropped now to the cloud murk of the horizon, yet there was not a light below, no gleam of fire or telltale wisp of smoke to rise in air and advertise the armed camp. An air of secrecy hovered over all. Only here and there subdued starshine brought faint gleams from metal helmets or the gunmetal surface of some mechanized monster. It was the temporary camp of a mobile patrol of Nazi desert troops.

This of course, meant nothing to Bones. But the wonderful smells that assailed him now, meant plenty. Scent of horses, of coffee and tinned meat, and the fearsome but fascinating aroma of humans in quantity and close up. Now the moon had almost gone and that blackest of black hours preceding the dawn had come, the hour most loved of all by those who skulk and prey.

What Bones did now was a further white light upon hyena nature. The camp below was a hornets' nest of danger, yet closer and closer he prowled, sniffing hopefully for scraps or refuse, listening with all his body, his eyes like glowing coals in the darkness, his hunger like glowing coals in his belly. Of all games the most dangerous perhaps, this haunting of armed camps by night, yet for some reason the best loved of all to the hyena kind, as all African hunters learn, sometimes from the loss of part of their features or a mutilated arm, through the dumb, deadly, hunger-crazed charge of the beast in that same hushed hour before the dawn.

Near and nearer he drew to the sleeping camp and though he could see nothing, the British general on the distant ridge, all hunter now, knew quite well what was taking place, because he knew hyenas.

Here and there Nazi soldiers squatted about talking in the dark in guttural whispers. Bones eschewed these. He eschewed certain other things, too—the bristling field guns along the camp's edge with their fearsome smell of powder, the rows of squat gray battle tanks and beyond these, the wide-winged planes like grounded birds of prey. It was the sleeping men that fascinated him as he prowled and prowled, soundless as temptation's own shadow, enacting the same pantomime as he had enacted at the waterhole. And then, just


## HERE COMES THE DEAN

MERLE CONSTINER returns with the little man with the big Magnum to unravel the riddle of *Mr. Bettleman's Blisters*—the most unusual novelette yet in this perennially popular series. Why did the young man with the unloaded gun hock his Aunt Carmella's ashes? Why, when the urn was returned, did it contain black pepper instead of Auntie's silt? And why should an ugly little gargoyle of a man insist on having a no-marriage clause in the contract every time he hired a new stenographer? Ask the Dean—who else would know?

Don't miss D. L. CHAMPION'S new Inspector Allhoff novelette—*A Lag On Murder*. The Wiltern case was the sweetest slaying the ingenious coffee-sipper of Centre Street had ever attempted to solve between cups of his bitter brew. Yet hadn't Sergeant Simmonds, Allhoff's luckless assistant, had the foolhardiihood to wager three months' sugar-rations that Allhoff couldn't put his greedy finger on the playboy's killer?

And DALE CLARK, in *Necktie Party*, introduces you to a brand-new character—Plates O'Rion, official police photog—who'd rather be shot himself than shoot a phony picture. One look through the lens of his speed camera at the murder scene and we guarantee you'll stick around to see the film developed. Plus stories by MARVIN DeVRIES and others. This great NOVEMBER issue of DIME DETECTIVE is on sale now!

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

before the dawn, it happened—the thing that always happened. . . .

The waiting British on the ridge did not exactly hear the yell of pain from the sleeping Nazi trooper as Bones' oversize jaws clamped on his shoulder. Rather it was the ill-suppressed turmoil that rose from the whole enemy camp, roused as effectively as a bee hive into which a stone is dropped. For Bones himself had vanished so magically that no one was sure what the ruckus was about.

Already the Britishers were hastening back to their headquarters. Within ten minutes the general's sharp-barked orders were being executed: not to advance upon the waterhole as expected, but to withdraw, silently and with dispatch, for some six miles back the way they had come. All of the mobile units, that is. The rest of the patrol, including a dozen field guns and as many machine guns with their gun crews, were to move forward into positions overlooking the waterhole. The general himself remained with these. Plainly he and Fate—and old Bones, too—had picked the waterhole as a stage for dire things to transpire.

And they did. An hour and a half after sunrise the report of the first British tank gun shook the brittle desert stillness. Others followed rapidly, rolling and rumbling in diminishing crescendo to the very horizon, interspersed with the shriek and burst of shrapnel shell and the heavy clapping of the Nazi field guns. Old Bones, crouched trembling now in the mouth of his home burrow, could hear it all and see more than he cared to. And the British general from where he waited on a ridge above the waterhole hard by, could mark the exact position of his attacking force by the white converging puffs, rising like cotton wool from the sandy hills and the dry riverbed, beyond the German camp. Not until then did he flash the order by field telegraph to his air support, two miles away that planes were wanted.

THE drone of the rising planes was indiscernible now in the bedlam of sound. And so the Nazis, their own planes still grounded, were wholly unwarned of the approaching Spitfires and Hurricanes that came zooming low above the encircling hills to strafe them where they huddled in nice, tight formation. That sunken hollow between the hills that had been such a secret, had now become a trap.

There followed twenty-five minutes—though ages had got into those minutes it seemed—of that infernal, earth-shaking thunder of tank and field guns, punctuated by the high whine of the diving British planes like angry hornets overhead, crippling each Nazi plane before it could even get into the air.

The Nazi commander, in a voice that became a porcine scream of fury, commanded a retreat up the riverbed to the distant waterhole—he had known about that all along—where his men might deploy and find a degree of shelter among the trees.

That order worked smoothly enough. Covered by a formidable line of field guns flung across the riverbed, the withdrawal was executed without further loss of tank or truck. The attackers seemed willing enough to let them go. Indeed, the British seemed a bit dismayed by the swift maneuver, even the fury of the attacking planes had appreciably diminished. At first the Nazi commander had feared he was outflanked and vastly outnumbered. Now it appeared that a few daring and calculated moves by a seasoned campaigner like himself might yet win the day. His features took on the happy glow of imminent triumph.

But his glow was nothing compared to that on the bronzed face of the British general, where he lay waiting just over the crest of the sand hill, his body tense with that anticipatory zeal that only the big game hunter whose trap has been deftly laid can ever know. Disregarding the strained tense look of his second officer, he waited on, till the tight gray ranks were directly below the ridge, scarcely two hundred yards away, befor he gave the signal to fire.

And then, without an instant for the enemy to prepare for the shock, there erupted the indescribable, earthshaking rattle and thunder of the hidden British battery. All along the ridge above the

waterhole the machine guns vomited their endless stuttering rain of death. Below, in the open space about the water, shells sent up bursts of flame and smoke and high-flung sand; men rushed, collided and flung themselves flat on the ground in awful confusion, while around them and beside them, palm trees half vanished in clouds of splinters and smoke and the brush was clipped away in the hail of lead.

That raking fire came from three sides now. For three or four minutes a thin wave of Germans rallied and strove to mount the sandy slope with the aid of their sub-machine guns, but gaps formed immediately in the line, gaps that widened and were not filled as men fell and did not rise again. A minute or two more and what was left of the enemy flung down their weapons and stood with arms in air, in the midst of their dead and dying.

Bones' premonition of the evening had come true indeed, for Death had gorged itself royally that day about the waterhole.

IN mid-afternoon when all was over and the German dead were buried and the German living were marched away in a long dejected file, and silence had once more settled over the waste, Bones and family emerged to join the jackals, the marabout storks, the vultures and certain others who have the last word in all the dramas of the waste-land.

And about a week later at headquarters, where he came in for a great deal of lavish praise over the affair, the British general told of the part old Bones had played in the coup. His wild-life tale fell rather flat, however, upon the ears of staff officers freshly out from home, and the general continued to remain a rather queer card to his rank and file.

They couldn't understand why he issued, chief among the field orders, to the men of his next patrol—*Any man found guilty of shooting a hyena will forfeit a month's pay and spend a week in the guardhouse.*

★ ★ |||

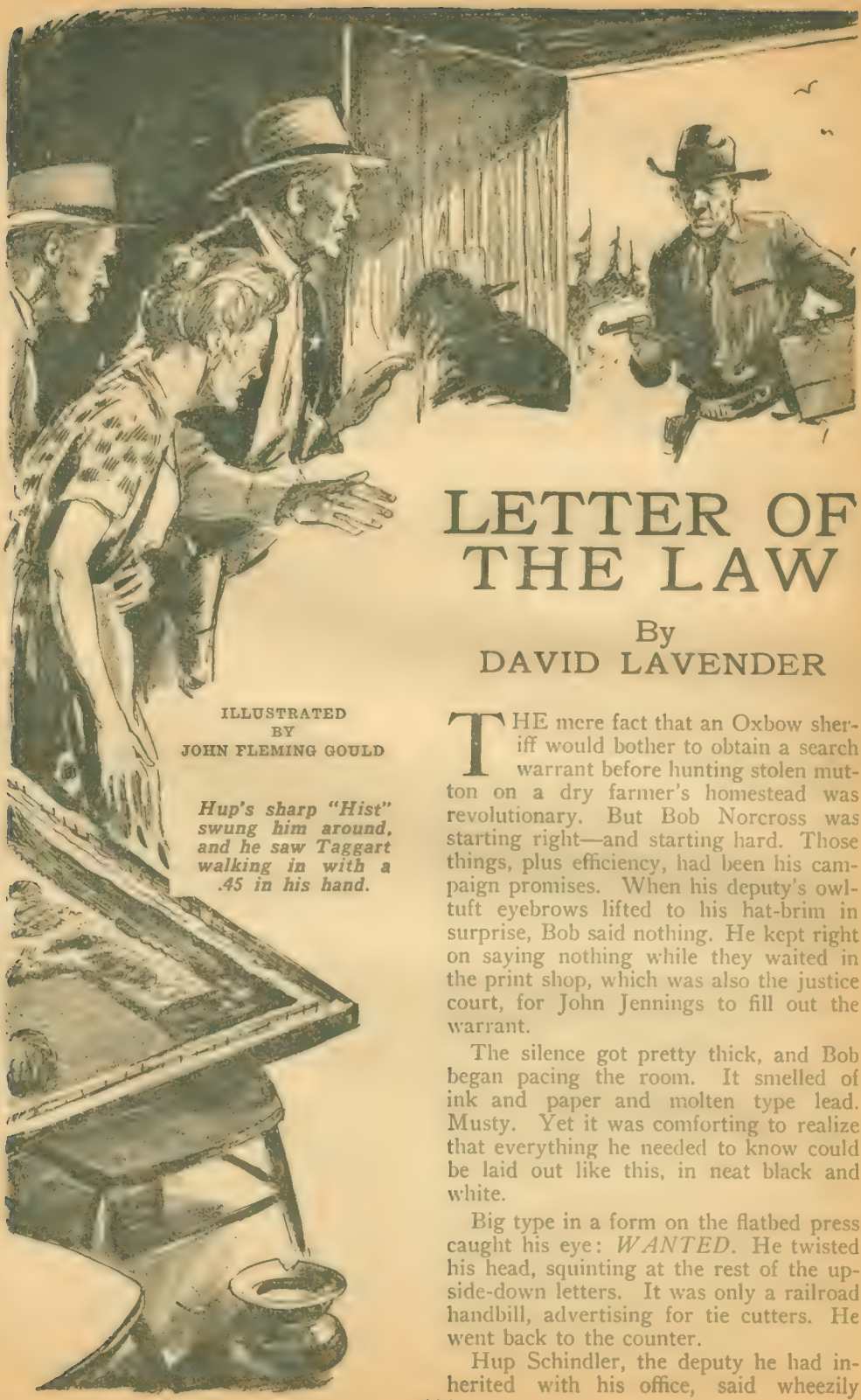
## CELLINI SMITH IS BACK!

. . . Back to whet *A Taste For Murder* in ROBERT REEVES' latest novelette of the none-such private dick. Cellini knew something was cooking at Hooper's Drive-in Eatery the minute he laid eyes on the three glamor-girl carhops—including a bit of Russian dressing named Tanya. But when the beefy chef started carving assorted cold cuts out of the customers, the kill-wise shamus hastily decided to move on, before too many crooks spoiled Cellini's broth.

DALE CLARK contributes another great O'Hanna novelette. *Now I Slay Me*—it's called, and with the first snow of the season blanketing the swank San Alpa the ski-wacks descend in force—among them a gal with a sense of Yuma. Too bad *she* wasn't on the murder list, but there are other kills to keep you—and the hard-luck house dick—guessing right up to the last paragraph.

Then there's a smashing new John Collins novelette—*Beat Me Daddy!*—by NORBERT DAVIS. The refugee piano player's working in a jukeless joint outside a military camp now, and he pounds out the sweetest solution to murder we've listened to in ages. Plus the final spine-chilling chapter of *Donovan's Brain* by CURT SIODMAK, and other exciting shorts to complete a thrill-packed NOVEMBER issue of BLACK MASK! On sale now!

★ |||



# LETTER OF THE LAW

By
DAVID LAVENDER

ILLUSTRATED
BY
JOHN FLEMING GOULD

*Hup's sharp "Hist" swung him around, and he saw Taggart walking in with a .45 in his hand.*

THE mere fact that an Oxbow sheriff would bother to obtain a search warrant before hunting stolen mutton on a dry farmer's homestead was revolutionary. But Bob Norcross was starting right—and starting hard. Those things, plus efficiency, had been his campaign promises. When his deputy's owl-tuft eyebrows lifted to his hat-brim in surprise, Bob said nothing. He kept right on saying nothing while they waited in the print shop, which was also the justice court, for John Jennings to fill out the warrant.

The silence got pretty thick, and Bob began pacing the room. It smelled of ink and paper and molten type lead. Musty. Yet it was comforting to realize that everything he needed to know could be laid out like this, in neat black and white.

Big type in a form on the flatbed press caught his eye: *WANTED.* He twisted his head, squinting at the rest of the upside-down letters. It was only a railroad handbill, advertising for tie cutters. He went back to the counter.

Hup Schindler, the deputy he had inherited with his office, said wheezily

through bad-fitting plates: "Suppose Taggart did butcher a couple of sheep? If they were up at Mud Springs, they were lost an' the coyotes would of got them anyhow."

"That's not the point," Bob said. "If he gets away with this, he'll try again on sheep that aren't lost. So will all the other no-goods around here."

John Jennings pushed his spectacles up on his forehead, signifying his writing was done. "It's too bad," he said. "Mrs. Taggart was in town just yesterday, sellin' them rag rugs she makes. Right pretty, specially the yaller ones. But she's ruinin' her eyes on 'em. It's too bad."

"You see," the sheriff said to Hup. "Plumb no-account. Lettin' his wife support him while he spends his time petty thieving. And spitting tobacco juice to show how tough he is."

He took the warrant, folded it and creased it with his thumb nail. He wished now that he hadn't spoken at all. He needed no justification for what he was doing. The law was perfectly plain.

"Let's go," he said to Hup.

THEY came over the hill above the homestead and the corners of their mouths pulled downward. The spring had been dry, and out in the dusty field the winter wheat looked thin and yellow. Tumbleweeds caught on the sagging fence wires rattled in the hot wind, and in the front yard of the little shack a broken plow leaned rustily. A man could have spent a solid week tidying up the place, but there was no sign of Taggart.

"You see," Bob said again.

The loft of the sorry, unchinked barn was the logical place for the mutton to be hanging, but Bob went first to the cabin, knocked and presented his warrant. Mrs. Taggart barely glanced at it. Her eyes fled involuntarily toward the barn.

Behind her was a wooden frame, set up near the single window. The burlap stretched across the frame held a half-finished hooked rug, bright blue and yellow. Mrs. Taggart saw Bob looking at it. "It's going to be pretty, isn't it?" she asked, peering at him hopefully.

Bob stirred uneasily. But the law was the law. And Mrs. Taggart's rug money would go a lot further if she didn't have a worthless husband to support and buy tobacco for. He drew himself up.

Mrs. Taggart said desperately: "I like the yellow. Lucky there's lots of canaigre brush grows here. We can make yellow dye from its roots."

Her faded eyes clung to him. He frowned, looking again at the sunny pattern the rug made in the dreary room. And then he saw the coffee can on the floor, half filled with sand stained brown by tobacco juice. He glowered at it.

Hup's sharp "Hist!" swung him around. Taggart was approaching, a large cardboard box under his arm, a .45 in his hand.

Bob leaped out the door to meet him, so swiftly that the homesteader stopped short in his tracks, his wad of tobacco a hard lump in his cheek.

Finally he found his voice. "The new sheriff," he said and spat.

Bob measured him. "Taggart," he said, "if you had a man's job, maybe you wouldn't have to act so tough."

Taggart stiffened. "Listen—"

Bob cut him off. "The railroad needs tie cutters. The news isn't around yet. If you skin right down there, you can get on. Tell them I sent you."

Taggart stared at him, then at the barn and backed off a step, uncertain. "I—" He shook himself, realizing suddenly that Bob meant what he said. "I'm right obliged, Norcross. I'll sure do it." He fled into the house.

Bob and Hup walked to their horses. The puzzled deputy asked: "You seen the canaigre root in that box? You figured he was some account after all?"

"Canaigre?" Bob said. "No, I didn't notice."

"Then why in—"

"Her eyes, Hup. Cataracts. She can't see to hook those fancy patterns."

It was Hup's turn to stare. "You mean Taggart makes—aw, you're nuts."

Bob shrugged. "Mrs. Taggart doesn't chaw tobacco. And there's a gabboon on the floor where a person can use it without moving from his seat by the frame." The sheriff laughed. "I'd act tough too, to keep people from guessing."

"Yeah." Hup grinned. He'd seen hell-for-leather sheriffs come into office before. "Tough as the letter of the law."

# YUMPIN' YIMMINY —A YAP!

By
FRANK
RICHARDSON
PIERCE

SVEN NORDSTROM was playing a pin-ball machine in the Loggers' Rest at Mill City when news of the Pearl Harbor attack came over the radio. The impact on the fifty or sixty customers in the resort was tremendous. Dealers stopped shuffling cards, pool players froze in their tracks, and the cook let a steak burn. Sven, alone, remained unmoved. At the moment, the most important objective in life was hitting number seven with his last ball. He concentrated, shifted the wad of snoose under his lower lip, drew back the plunger and fired.

The ball hit a peg, rebounded and smacked number seven mightily. Lights blazed, bells rang and a pint of nickels gushed like water from a cache deep in the machine's innards. "Yumpin' Yimminy, Aye hit the yackpot."

"They're bombing Pearl Harbor, Sven!" someone yelled.

"So?" Sven observed, dumping the nickels into his pocket. "Aye figger Aye yoin the marines and get me a Yap."

That was Sven all over—cold as a harlot's heart in an emergency. In the five years that he had made the Loggers' Rest his headquarters—when not in the woods—he had betrayed excitement but three times.

*It would take a bit of doing to drop the fir just right.*

The first was that sanguinary night when Bruiser McGee—the best rough-and-tumble fighter in big timber—loudly bellowed, "A Swede is a Norwegian, with the brains left out!"

"Yumpin' Yimminy, Aye feel fight coomin' on," Sven had answered, then launched his six feet three inches and two hundred and thirty pounds at McGee's six feet four, and two hundred and forty.

The fight ended fifteen minutes later when Sven hurled the groggy McGee at a window, missed and drove his vanquished opponent's head through a heavily lathed and plastered wall.

The owner of the Loggers' Rest computed the damage without regret. "Boys," he addressed his customers, "you've just seen a fight that would have grossed a million bucks in New York. It just goes to show what you get at my place . . . free."

His swampers lugged McGee to the hospital, then cleaned up the joint. When interviewed at the hospital by Charley Webster of the *News*, McGee said, "The incident hasn't changed my opinion of Swedes. They haven't sense enough to know when the odds are against them."

The second occasion when a Yumpin' Yimminy came right from Sven's heart was his first view of the Rest's new waitress. Her name was Brunnehilde and she looked the part down to the last pound. She was dealing platters of sizzling steaks off a shapely, if sturdy arm. Sven almost swallowed his snoose. "Aye could go fer her in plenty big way, bay yumpin' Yimminy Yeez."

"Yeah?" a logger remarked. "A beer drummer had the same idea last week. She blacked both eyes and tossed him over a park bench."

"This time," Sven Nordstrom answered, "Aye got honorable intention, bay golly." He had just finished dinner—the tooth pick proved it—but he tossed the pick aside and ordered a second. His subsequent attentions were so honorable he was afraid to take Brunnehilde's arm at street crossings.

Hitting the long-elusive jackpot was the third occasion when Sven was deeply moved. Now he walked over to the counter and said, "This be gude-bye, Brunnehilde, Aye yoin the marines . . ."

"There's no hurry, Sven," Jeff Latimer, Trent Logging Company's general manager, said.

"Aye ain't no yerk," Sven answered.

"No one is going to call you a jerk," Jeff said. "I'd like to get a Jap myself, but wars are different now. A thousand years ago, a Viking like you, just braided his hair a little tighter, caught up sword and shield and was all set. The folks left behind wouldn't have been near the brawl. Now we're all in it, and each man's got to be in the spot where he'll do the most good. We're going to need lumber as never before for barracks to shelter the soldiers; piers and warehouses to take care of supplies; timbers for bridges and ships."

Sven glanced at Brunnehilde and her face plainly betrayed her thoughts. Sven would look mighty impressive in a uniform.

"You're one of the best high riggers in big timber, Sven," Jeff continued. "The things you can do with an axe would go over on the stage, and when it comes to dropping a tree . . . why I've seen you drive a stake in the ground a hundred and fifty feet from the trunk, then drop the tree on the stake. You're needed right here."

Jeff Latimer, like Sven, was known as a man of few words. This was the longest speech he had ever made, and Sven was impressed, but he looked at Brunnehilde and said, "Aye yoin the marines and get me a Yap. Plenty other fellers gude as me round here."

"The hell there are," Jeff answered. "You're tops in everything. You can ride a log in rough water and—"

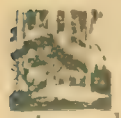
"Aye never ride log through Rough River canyon," Sven said.

"Who has?" Jeff retorted. "The Japs are going to try to make trouble for us around here, one way or another. One way to slow down production is to start forest fires which will not only burn timber, but put the power lines out of business, and stop work at the navy yard, the ship yards and Boeing's."

"You yust try talk me into somethin'," Sven argued. "Aye yoin marines and get my Yap."

"Stay with me, Sven, until the trees on that north stand of fir are topped and rigged," Jeff pleaded. "There'll be a couple of Japs left over by the time you finish that."

"Aye stay," Sven assented, looking doubtfully at Brunnehilde, who appeared to agree this was reasonable.



SEVERAL weeks later Corwin, the local forest ranger, met Jeff Latimer on the street. "Has Sven simmered down, yet, or has he still got that marine idea in his noodle?"

"When a Swede gets an idea into his head," Jeff answered, "it's hard to get it out. The big fellow is needed here but I don't know how long I can hang onto him. Complications have come up."

"How so?"

"McGee is in town. He's a top sergeant in an army outfit stringing barbed wire at spots where invaders are likely to try to land," Corwin said. "Brunnehilde has joined the junior hostesses and they're seeing a lot of each other. You can see where that's leading to."

When Sven came to town he looked in on a junior volunteer hostess dance and found Brunnehilde dancing with McGee. He shifted his snoose and muttered, "So?" Then he went down to the stage depot and asked for a ticket to the nearest marine recruiting office.

Corwin found him there killing time. "Brunnehilde dancing with McGee don't mean a damn thing," he said. "She dances with all the boys. That's her job. It's her way of helping lick the Japs. McGee is doing his part stringing wire, and you're helping the Trent outfit get out lumber. Now, Sven, Uncle Sam is going to need you the next few weeks."

"So?" Sven was interested.

"Yes, the Forest Service," Corwin explained. "Do you remember Wilson's Bench?"

Sven nodded. The bench was triangular. It was bordered on two sides by the north and south forks of Rough River. The third side was a granite hogback leading into the mountains. To gain the bench it was necessary to climb into the canyon, cross the forks and climb out again. Few thought it worth while.

"We've made extensive preparations for incendiary fires this coming season," Corwin explained, "but we ran out of money before we could build bridges across the Rough River canyons. At certain points on the banks there are big trees that will make first rate bridges if dropped exactly right. You're the man to drop them. If fire breaks out on the bench, we've got to get men and equipment over there in a hurry. How about it?"

Sven shook his head. "Plenty udder fellers gude as me. Aye yoin marines."

"They're not as good as you, Sven. You can do the job alone. Most of the men I know will need a helper," Corwin argued, "and we're short of men right now. Of course if you feel . . ."

"Aye go," Sven grumbled, "but this is last time. Next time Aye coom out of woods Aye yoin marines."

FIVE days later Sven bridged a hundred foot canyon, with a hundred and eighty foot fir. He walked along the trunk, trimming off branches, then he went to work with the adz, dressing down the log until his pack horse, that had led a clean life and wasn't subject to dizzy spells, could have crossed. Three days had gone into the job, but the Forest Service had a bridge to Wilson's Bench.

He was in his sleeping bag mentally organizing things for the next move when a plane's motor broke the deep silence of the forest. Sven watched it circle the bench, flying two thousand feet above the tree tops. It resembled a Forest Service plane, but the pilot lacked the confidence common in the pilots Sven knew. He followed it with binoculars.

Now, he guessed, it was over the transmission line which crossed the bench; now it was over Loon Lake, a small body of water so remote the Game Commission had planted trout by dropping cans attached to parachutes.

The plane's door opened and a bundle dropped five hundred feet before a parachute opened. The plane returned

to the approximate spot and a man followed the bundle. He was a bulky fellow, with various objects strapped to some sort of harness he was wearing.

"Aye figger Aye take a look," Sven said. He dressed, crossed his log bridge, and headed for Loon Lake. He broke from the timber, stared in amazement, and did a back dive into the nearest thicket. "Yumpin' Yimminy—a Yap!" he exclaimed.

The Jap had tried to land on the lake shore, but had either misjudged, or been carried too far by a tricky air current, and his chute had caught in a branch near the top of a fir. As the Jap attempted to extricate himself from his predicament, Sven looked on with something approaching academic calm.

The Jap removed the various items he carried, and tossed them into neighboring tree tops to break the fall. They included hand grenades, axe, ammunition and a packet of concentrated food. His body lightened, he began swinging until his legs wrapped themselves around the trunk, then with a display of back and stomach muscle strength that impressed Sven, he straightened his body until his arms were about the trunk in spite of the drag from the chute shrouds.

The test proved it was impossible to work his way down the tree. The trunk was too thick, and he would fall long before he reached the ground.

He uncoiled a knotted rope and checked on the distance from the end to the ground. The rope was too short. He could climb down, of course, and let go, but it was likely he would break his legs, or be killed on the rocks, which the tree roots had pushed up.

"There's my Yap," Sven mused, "but how Aye get the son-of-er-gun?" He tucked a fresh wad of snoose under his lower lip, and considered.

Sven reasoned he could climb the tree, and with what rope he had, lower the Jap to the ground. Then he realized he would be literally up a tree. The Jap had important business and no sense of appreciation. He wouldn't hesitate to kill his benefactor, whereas Sven couldn't bring himself to kill the man in cold blood.

Of course, if he helped the Jap down, and then the fellow jumped him, Sven's killing would be in combat. Conflicting philosophies puzzled the logger. "Aye tak chance bay golly," he concluded, "and if yellow yerk tries somethin' . . . Yumpin' Yimminy, Aye ferget—yoo-i-yitsoo."

Sven recalled a contest he had seen once in which a little yellow Jap had made a big white man bellow like a bull.

"Aye better figger 'nudder scheme," Sven muttered.

IT WAS ten miles to the nearest Forest Service telephone and help. The line might be out, too, at this season of the year. And the Jap might find a method of getting down while he was making the twenty mile round trip.

Sven quietly left the scene and searched until he found the other parachute. It was draped over a blueberry thicket, and the heavy package—wrapped with straw to protect it against shock—contained a radio transmission set. Nothing had been forgotten. It included pedals, sprocket and chain attached to a generator. There was a wind charger to keep the wet batteries at maximum strength.

Such a set could supply a beam to bombers coming in from the sea. "Bay Yeez!" Sven exclaimed savagely as the possibilities dawned upon him. "Aye mad. Aye feel fight coomin' on."

He carried the pack down to his horse, loaded and lashed it securely and started the animal on the trail. It would take its time, but would eventually plod into Mill City. And, Sven reasoned, every hour would take the outfit that much beyond the Jap's reach in case his own plan went wrong. There was, he realized, plenty of chance for just that to happen.

Sometime later Sven took observations. The Jap's position was unchanged. Sven sauntered into the open, amusing himself by hurling the double-bitted axe through the air and driving the blade into convenient trees.

"Hey!"

Sven turned and made a fine show of

surprise. "What goes on har?" he asked. "Bay golly . . . a Yap."

There was no telling what was going on in the brain behind the composed, yellow features. "It would appear that I am your prisoner of war," the Jap said in good English.

The defeatist touch to the statement left Sven Nordstrom unimpressed. "So?" he commented.

"Dumb Swede," thought the Jap who had spent time with the Swedish fishermen in Alaska. He said, "Get me safely down and I'll agree to give you no trouble. On my word of honor."

"Peace understandin'?" Sven inquired.

"That's it."

"No dice," Sven said. "Aye read about your peace business in paper. You get first yump on us. Now we feel fight coomin' on and we mad lak hell. You don't get second yump, not even on dumb Swede. Aye tank Aye leave you to crows. No, not so good. Crows are yentlemen."

"You don't trust me?"

"Coom round in five hundred years, mebbe Aye trust you. See how you behave. Aye got plan now."

Sven prospected through the rocks and brush beneath the Jap until he had found the equipment he had dropped. Sven gave the Jap a bad moment when he pulled the detonator of a hand grenade. He threw it into the lake in time, and watched the water spout upward and fall back.

"Aye always wonder how them things work," he said. "Here goes!"

He exploded them all, then got into his climbing gear. He circled the tree with his steel-cored rope, flipped it upward until it caught on the rough bark, dug in his climbing irons and was on his way—alternately flipping the rope higher and climbing.

When he reached the Jap's level the latter warned, "No funny stuff. If you try killing me by sawing off that limb, I'll let you have it." He drew his automatic pistol for the first time and gave Sven a good look into the muzzle.

"So?" Sven shrugged. "You need me to live." He climbed to the limb, freed the rope from the belt long enough to work it above, then climbed a few feet higher. The fouled chute lay in folds below him. Sven made an undercut to determine the direction he wanted the top to fall, then went to work on the opposite side. He sawed rapidly, tirelessly, pouring his great strength into the effort. Whenever he looked down he could see the Jap's upturned face, full of concern now, for all the tightly clutched pistol in his yellow hand.

"If that top comes my way, I'll pick you off, Swede," he warned.

"So?"

A few minutes later several tons of top kicked off of a platform twelve inches in diameter, and fell a distance equal to eighteen stories.

As it fell toward the Jap, he fired, but Sven was like a monkey on a stick as the fir vibrated in ten foot arcs. The top missed the Jap by a comfortable six feet, and Sven descended to the ground in a series of breath-taking drops, spikes deftly driving into the bark just when it seemed he was doomed.

"Yerk," he accused. "How you figger you hit feller yigglin' back and fort' up there?" He explained to the Jap the next step in his plan and concluded with, "That's only way Aye get you down so you can't get yump on me."

IT WOULD take a bit of doing to drop the tree so that the Jap would swing over the lake and into the water like a load of freight from a descending cargo boom. The branch supporting the Jap must clear a tree or be torn off. The resulting death of the Jap would be purely accidental, and would bother Sven little. Failure, professionally, however would irk Sven's pride and a poorly felled tree would lie long on his conscience. Never had he given more care to undercutting and sawing.

Finally he inserted the thin, steel faller's wedges, tapping here, tapping there, watching the top shift against the sky with each tap.

The Jap, dubious at first, suddenly saw a way of getting the upper hand. A wet pistol might jam, but the cartridge in the chamber would explode and one shot was all he needed. He looked down

on the laboring logger. "A wet, fresh man with a pistol, against a tired man with only a double-bitted axe," he reflected.

The wood fibers deep in the fir's heart began snapping under the strain and Sven, giving a final tap, yelled, "Timber-r-r-r!"

As the tree moved outward, downward, Sven noticed the Jap was freeing himself from the chute harness. He struck the water ahead of and to the right of the tree, and he went deep.

The tree split the water into two violent sheets and before it settled, Sven was racing along the trunk, double-bitted axe in hand. He saw the Jap's face two feet under water, eyes open. Perhaps it was murderous intent, possibly the ripple on the surface that distorted the features.

He broke water and said, "Good work, logger. Give me your hand."

"Aye take no hands," Sven countered, and the axe blade lightly touched the Jap's scalp. "Drop the gun before Aye slice."

The Jap's free hand caught the limb and drove his body under the water. When he came up again, the grim-faced Swede and axe were waiting. He dropped the gun and crawled out.

"Keep goin'," Sven ordered, "until we coom to my camp. If you stop sudden, Aye slice you. If you run, Aye throw axe at you."

At camp, Sven forced the Jap to lie face downward, hands behind his back. He lightly pressed his boot calks into the Jap's shoulder, lashed the man's hands, then looped a rope about his throat.

When their eyes again met, Sven sensed rather than detected the trend of the Jap's thoughts. He must know it was a good two days' travel over winding trails, up mountains and down, to Mill City. He would be reasoning that he, as prisoner, had the advantage. He would be able to sleep, refresh himself in mind and body, maintain alertness at its peak. Sven would not dare sleep. Sometime during the forty-eight hours Sven would lower his guard. Then, it would happen faster than the eye could follow.

"Aye got batter idear," Sven said, breaking the silence.

"Better idea than . . . what?" the Jap asked.

"Batter idear that what you figger'n on," Sven replied. "Now you start down little trail deer make when she drink water."

The trail was a steep one and the Jap slipped repeatedly. It ended at a log jam in Rough River. Sven tied the Jap, selected a log with care and cut it clear of the jam. The Jap protested violently when Sven lashed him well forward on the log.

"Mebbe you like hair parted with axe?" Sven suggested. He explained that as long as the Jap remained quiet, he could keep the log top side up, but if there was any nonsense the Jap's weight would turn it over.

"Have you ever gone down a river like this before?" the Jap asked.

"Aye gude white water birler," Sven answered, "but nobody ever go through Rough River canyons before. Bay Yeez, Aye give you batter chance than you'd give me. Mebbe you batter learn hol' your breath long time. Plenty bad water ahead."

He pushed the log into the current, then climbed on. He drove the axe deep into the wood, then set his calks. The Jap twisted his head until he could see the logger. He thought it odd that such a great barge of a man could maintain his balance on a rolling log—maintain it with the lightness of a slender dancer.

THE canyon walls slipped past with increasing speed. A half hour later Sven gently grounded the log on a bar. He stretched his arms and legs. "Aye rest coople minutes. Worser water ahead."

The Jap looked pretty sick over the prospect. He could dish it out, but he couldn't take it. Again and again he was certain the log would dash against the rocks, and each time it cleared by a close margin.

Sven pointed out that in a half hour on the river short cut they had nearly reached the Wolf Creek ranger station, which was a hard day's travel by trail

from Loon Lake. He launched the log again and grounded it five minutes later. The ranger station was perched on the canyon brink, five hundred feet above.

At this point Rough River ran quietly through high, sheer walls. Sven cupped his hands and bellowed. There was no answer, but he took the silence calmly. Wood smoke drifting across the canyon assured him someone was in the cabin. After a protracted period of bellowing, a surprised face looked down.

"Hy-yah, Sam!" Sven bellowed.

"What're you doing down there?" the ranger asked.

"Aye capture Yap parachutist!"

"You captured what?"

"Yap parachutist," Sven roared. "Aye take river short cut. Aye 'fraid he work this har yoo-i-yitsoo on me on trail."

"I'd sooner take a chance on jiu-jitsu," the ranger yelled down. "That river's got tricks the Japs never heard of."

"You batter go up trail and meet my pack horse," Sven suggested.

"O. K. I'll telephone Mill City and tell them you're coming," the ranger promised.

Sven loosened up his muscles and started the log on another leg of its voyage. The river, he knew, grew progressively worse—the canyon a mile above Mill City fairly boiled. As Sven thought of that canyon, he shook his head. He had walked along its rim scores of times, speculating on the best way of running it, and always sensibly concluded there was no sense in committing suicide.

Now he heard the thunder of it long before he saw the white water. Mists, drifting upward, obscured the rim. He saw the tension gather in the Jap. Back in the Oriental's mind, perhaps, was the desperate belief he could unload somewhere in the canyon, hide out until darkness, then swim to the bay.

Sven looked ahead and then jerked his axe from the log. His calked boots turned the log until the Jap was under water. Sven held his own breath and when his lungs were bursting, he turned the log again and gave his prisoner a chance to breathe. He turned the log into a stretch of bad water, and the foam and spray piled up until it obscured the Jap, and drenched Sven's legs to the knees.

The roar was deafening. Rocks protruded like waiting fangs ready to shatter the log. He couldn't give further attention to the Jap. The tricky canyon demanded his entire attention and received it.

The log skirted the rim of a whirlpool, made three complete revolutions, then dropped into the vortex where it turned around slowly, like a windmill.

The river toyed with the log three long minutes, then hurled it into the flood again.

Sven Nordstrom's huge legs were weakening under the strain. He could feel his knees tremble, and muscles twitch. "Yumpin' Yimminy," he muttered disgustedly. "Aye goin' sissy on myself."

He saw the low falls and the cascades beyond. Here the river did its worst after wearing down its man in the water higher up.

Sven set his jaw and tried to control his trembling legs. The cords in his neck stood out from the strain. The half-drowned Jap was pale under his yellow skin—a sorry sight. The river had knocked out all thoughts of any eleventh-hour escape.

Sven tucked a fresh wad of snoose under his lower lip and returned the little tin to his pocket. "Bay Yeez," he muttered, "that helps feller out." He controlled his legs and held his breath, then . . .

The water on the brink of the low falls curved beautifully. The log settled until the water was almost to Sven's knees, as the down-stream end with its sodden burden thrust out from the foam, and then the stream hurled it over furiously.

Straight into a rainbow it plunged and Sven was jarred loose from the log. His big hands clawed and held. He straddled the log, got onto his knees, then dug in his calks. Then he turned the log over until the Jap's face was clear.

The prisoner coughed and spluttered

and drew a deep breath into his bursting lungs.

Sven was in the cascades now, bouncing up and down until his teeth rattled. Suddenly the river confessed defeat and tossed him into a smooth stretch. At the end lay the sparkling, blue waters of the bay.

SVEN'S eyes took in the crowd—a truck-load of soldiers bouncing over the tide flats, a frantic young man unreeling telephone wire that had been spliced to the line running on poles a quarter of a mile away. The ranger's phone call had certainly put Mill City in an uproar. Dozens of men he knew were waiting—yes, and Brunnehilde, too.

"Yumpin' Yimminy," Sven said softly, "she ain't never look at me like that before. Bay Yeez, Aye feel weddin' coomin' on."

He turned the log to the bank and practically delivered his prisoner at Brunnehilde's feet. A motion picture camera was grinding away, still cameras were shooting film right and left, but Sven couldn't keep his eyes off Brunnehilde's. Something in them made his knees shake harder than Rough River had managed to do.

"Sven! Darling!" she exclaimed. Then she kissed him, and with McGee looking on, too.

"Mr. Nordstrom," someone was saying, "do you realize you captured the first Jap soldier to land on continental American territory? Come on, tell us about it."

"Tell the world about it," a feverish young man added, holding a mike near Sven's lips.

"Hey," Sven protested. "What goes on har?"

"A broadcast," Brunnehilde explained. "It's just like the broadcasts you hear over the radio after the big prizefights. You know, 'It was a great fight, Ma. Tell all my friends I wasn't hurt a bit and I'll be home soon.'"

Sven nodded. He started to speak, then looked surprised and pained. "Bay golly, Aye musta swallered my snoose goin' over the falls," he muttered. He tucked a fresh supply under his lower lip, drew in a deep breath and told the story—with gestures. "An' that's all," he concluded.

"Well, not quite all," the radio man suggested. "What are your future plans, Mr. Nordstrom?"

"Aye feel big weddin' coomin' on," Sven answered. "And after honeymoon Aye . . . yoin the marines, bay Yimminy!"

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES DE FEO

# THE CAMP-FIRE

*Where readers, writers and adventurers meet*

OUR new serial is a tale of one of the world's great struggles for freedom. When the 19th century dawned the United States of America was a free nation, but Spain ruled firmly in the lands to the south of us. While we fought our first war as a free people in 1812, the banners of Liberty were unfurled in the south. Simon Bolivar, although widely heralded now as "The Liberator" was not the first nor the greatest, of South America's soldiers of freedom.

In 1814, Bernardo O'Higgins, the son of a great Irishman and of a Chilean mother, established free rule in Chile by victories over the Spanish tyrants, but his military victories established as President of Chile the unstable and undependable José Miguel Carrera. When the Spanish forces rallied and, with reinforcements from Peru, attacked O'Higgins, the delay of Carrera in marching to his aid resulted in a crushing defeat for the patriots at Rancagua on October 2, 1814.

The defeated Chilean Army fled across the Andes to the Argentine, first of the great South American states to achieve its freedom from Spain. The Argentine offered sanctuary to patriots from a neighboring nation and General José Francisco de San Martin, first soldier of the Argentine, was permitted to form an army to aid O'Higgins.

Carrera, who was popular with the politicians of Buenos Aires and less popular with army men such as San Martin, went to the United States to gain support for the cause of liberty in Chile.

In the meantime, Colonel Manuel Rodriguez Ardoiza, who had fought bravely under O'Higgins and Carrera, went upon fantastic recruiting expeditions to rouse the Indians against the Spanish oppressors and raise from their ranks an army of freedom.

It was rumored that the *Portenos*, as the citizens of Buenos Aires were called, were glad of an excuse to send San Martin, the successful soldier, on another mission so that he would not be politically active. The Chilean leaders, on their part, were jealous of one another and far from being in harmony on their plans.

It may be seen, then, that the patriots of Chile, like men of different religions serving the same God, moved by different paths to the same end.

This is the story of all of them and particularly of those Americans who came with General Carrera to play their part in a nation's fight to be free.

William E. Barrett, the author of "To the Last Man," sends us the following about his novel and how he came to write it. He says—

A good many years ago I was a cub engineer on the night shift in a gas works. My job was to watch the pulse, temperature etc. of a water-gas machine. There was not very much to do, but I had a young Mexican to help me do it. At least I thought that he was a Mexican. One night we talked about the First World War and my assistant shrugged his shoulders.

"That war, she is not so toff," he said. "Plenty of people came back. In my country we have a war and nobody came back."

I could not remember any Mexican war like that and I told him so. He shrugged his shoulders again. "Mexico? But no, señor. My country is Paraguay."

"Paraguay? Then why masquerade as a Mexican?" I asked him. "Are you ashamed of Paraguay?"

He looked straight at me. "No, señor. Not ashamed. But when I go out in the evening to drink, smoke, have a little fun, I tell people that I am from Paraguay and they look at me like nobody is from Paraguay. Bimeby somebody says 'How are things in Peru?' Señor, that is too damn much trouble."

I was stopped cold. I could not think of one intelligent thing to ask him about Paraguay. I did not know the difference between Paraguay and Peru. I could not name the Latin American republics, much less their capitals. I had never heard of the war from which nobody came back. The recognition of my own ignorance started me on a fascinating trail of study and travel which led, over the years, to a pretty wide knowledge of Latin America and Latin American affairs. In 1938, my book "Woman on Horseback," the biography of Lopez and Lynch of Paraguay, was on the best-seller list in this country for ten weeks. It was later translated into German, Spanish, Portuguese and Scandinavian.

"To the Last Man" is my second long work against a Latin American background and it covers what I consider one of the most colorful struggles for freedom in all history: the liberation of Chile with the support of San Martin of the Argentine. My central character Archer is fictitious, of course, but there were American adventurers in that fight and they were brought to South America by Carrera as told in the story. Rodriguez is also a real character, as is, of course, O'Higgins and San Martin. The historical facts and sequences, too, are correct except for some compression at the end where I wind up the Carrera-Rodriguez feud much sooner than was actually the case.

Chile and the Argentine are rather unpopular in the United States at the moment because of their disinclination to take firm steps against the Axis, but the love of liberty blazes brightly in both of those countries and neither one of them, I am sure, will ever become an Axis puppet. The main difficulty in the present situation is that Chile and the Argentine enjoy a climate like our own and produce the same foodstuffs: wheat, corn, cattle, sheep, etc. They are our natural competitors and they know that in the post-war world, we cannot buy from them: they must sell to whoever is top dog in Europe.

Chile and the Argentine today are in much the same fix as the Irishman who, when dying, sent for the priest. Everything was all right until the priest asked the dying man, "And now do you denounce the devil and all his works?" The Irishman set his lips. "No, Father." The priest was startled. "You must, man," he said. "You are dying."

The Irishman nodded. "I know it, Father. And it's no time to be making enemies."

So—our good neighbors may be slow in "denouncing" but they will not embrace the devil, either.

THE author of "Native Son" hails from "down under" himself. Ray Yonge, making his first appearance at our *Camp-Fire*, rises to introduce himself—

I was born thirty-two years ago in Christchurch, New Zealand; came to America in 1919, and since then have lived in the West (Los Angeles) and the East (New York and Connecticut). I have the usual list of odd jobs that seems to go with all people who want to write—movie usher, tanker messboy, itinerant fruit-picker in the West, have written publicity and a couple of radio programs; lately stuck to fiction and hope to keep sticking. The background circumstances of "Native Son" are true (or were true, at least) and the Maori is a brave and modest and first-class fighting man who does not kill the lousy Hun or Jap, as the case may be, by sticking out his tongue and making faces at him in a

Maori war dance (as reported colorfully in the press during the fighting in Greece), but by plugging him with a bullet or a bayonet, the latter preferably.

I have a wife and two children and the hope that a longer story will represent me in ADVENTURE some day.

WHEN "Mission To Mauritania" arrived at our desk we read it with great interest and, we must confess, considerable wonder as to whether or not Mr. Surdez wasn't stretching the long rubber arm of coincidence perilously close to the breaking point in the incident of the meeting of Nick and the Nazi guard in the desert. Rubber being scarce as it is these days we chided the author and asked him if he oughtn't to ease up on the tension a bit, not pull the elastic quite so hard. Back came the following and we consider ourselves properly rebuked for ever having brought the subject up in the first place!

It may *seem* like a most fantastic coincidence in my story that Nick, captured by a German sentry in a remote region of the Mauritanian Sahara, should be recognized by the fellow. In fact, nothing could be more natural, more in line with cause and effect.

Nick was at that spot because he met certain definite qualifications required by the British Intelligence, one of them a previous experience of the Western Desert. Sergeant Ludwig Reggenbach was there for precisely that same reason: previous experience of the Western Desert. Nick had traveled for some two years in the Draa Region, where civilians were extremely rare, and would have been known by sight and name to three or four hundred Legionnaires, would have known a hundred or more by sight, at least fifty by name. To garrison the secret base, the German Army would select those candidates with long service in such blockhouses as Bou Bernous, men accustomed to the monotonous existence, the water, the intense heat, hence lease likely to "blow their tops."

I alighted from a train at Rayak, in Syria, and asked a question of a sergeant of the Foreign Legion standing nearby. He answered and casually tacked on my name. I remembered him as a corporal in a Saharan outpost, two years before, on another continent, thousands of miles away. It was not a coincidence: I had met him because I was interested in the Legion and he was serving in the Legion. I met him again for the same reason. But here is a coincidence for you: A German sailor stopped me on a Brooklyn Street, in 1936, and asked me for directions to get to his ship—and for the fare. He had been a Legionnaire in the Sahara and knew me by sight, though I could not recall him in particular.

I can tell you a true yarn you won't believe: I decided on a certain afternoon to scale the steep mountain at Agadir, Morocco, which was at the time still a closed port in a militarized zone, to visit the old Moorish fortress. At the top, a Senegalese sentry—of the 6th Regiment, if it matters—stuck out his bayonet and challenged me. At the second look, he grinned, presented arms and shouted: "Hy-o-ka-o, Massa Zozo!" He had been house-boy for a friend of mine, at Abidjan, Ivory Coast, ten years before. The Legion sergeant in charge of the wireless station was an old friend of one of my best friends in the Legion, which might not be coincidence, and exchanged wireless messages with another friend, a captain in the 9th Zouaves in Southern Algeria.

Hold on—he had his wife with him. She had been born in a small town on the Franco-Swiss frontier in which I had lived as a kid, and from 1910 to 1912, we had lived two doors apart in another French city. She gave me news of people I had not heard of in seventeen years! And she produced a letter from Lao-Kay, Indo-China, from a cousin, a senior-sergeant of the Legion, in which he mentioned having met "a guy from the mountains become a journalist in America" on the eve of his departure from Oran. That was me. While we were chatting, an old Senegalese woman who came to peddle vegetables asked to see me. She had a nephew in America. I come from America. Surely, I knew him. Well, I did—his name was Abdoulay Sek, I'd met him in Harlem, New York, where some will remember him as six-feet-three Alexander, a member of Marcus Garvey's African Guards. I also knew her grandson, a commercial employee in Grand Bassam—and she was some sort of a relation of someone a good many Americans heard about, M'Barik Phal, known in pugilistic circles as Battling Siki.

I could go on, give you another amazing sequence of coincidences aboard the good ship Sidi-bel-Abbes, between Oran and Marseilles.

But the meeting in the story is not a

*(Continued on page 118)*

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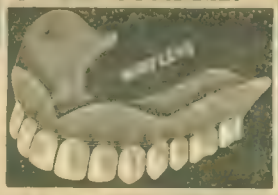

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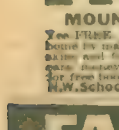

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*(Continued from page 116)*

coincidence. The Germans are making good use of their people who served in the French Foreign Legion. Most of them are with General Rommel's Afrika Korps, in Libya and at this writing, well into Egypt. There are more of them than you might imagine. The pre-war Legion was between twenty-five and thirty thousand strong, and more than half made up of Germans. Many of them returned home after one enlistment of five years, and were replaced by others. So that there were available in July 1940 all the thousands who had served, let us say, between 1919 and 1939, and the few thousands—twelve or fifteen thousand—in actual service at the time of the Armistice and liberated from obligations to France by its terms. Moreover, we may suppose that from 1934 to 1940, a large proportion of the Germans who enlisted in the Legion did so on ordered duty, to gain African experience in preparation for the big show to come.

When you deal with the Foreign Legion and Legionnaires, possibilities, probabilities, coincidences, are just words. Recently, the Free French Forces in Libya turned in a fine performance against Axis Forces, at Bir Hacheim. Part of those forces were Legionnaires, who belonged to that outfit whose recent history reads like a Cook's Tour of the World. They left the trenches before the Maginot Line in April 1940, landed in Norway, where they retook Narvik and scored the first land victory against the Nazis. Taken back to France, they refused to be bound by the Armistice and went to England. They were on the transports off Dakar the day of the bloody mixup. They landed in the Cameroons. They crossed the Dark Continent, fought in the Tripolitan Desert, in Eritrea, some in Ethiopia, participated in the first Libyan Campaign, were present at the occupation of Syria, returned for further Libyan shows. Well, the nucleus of that Legion outfit, including the commander of Bir Hacheim, General Pierre Koenig, are pre-war Legionnaires. And it is certain that they faced a good many other pre-war Legionnaires now on the Axis side.

I am sure that the big leaders in Senegal are pro-Nazi, collaborationists, as they are all Vichy appointees. It is certain that the key positions are held by their servants, that the ships, the flying-fields, are commanded by the little friends of Laval and Darlan. And I am equally certain that the officers and men actually

called on to help the Germans are very few—some aviators among them. The average officer serving Vichy, to protect his career and his family in a turbulent and uncertain world, hates the Germans more than we have yet learned to hate. Being an officer, he will obey, but, like Captain Merlet, he is ready to stretch a few points.

Submarines do refuel off Mauritania and in the Gulf of Guinea—they did in the other war, too.

The substitution of one ship for another is not new. It has been managed under far more difficult conditions. A retired naval officer told me, in 1929, about an incident off Morocco, in 1907, when he camouflaged a schooner to resemble a Spanish craft peddling earthenware pots and dishes along the coast, whose silhouette was well known, and thus approached and boarded a gun smuggler's boat. He had copies of the various official *procès-verbaux*, a letter of congratulations. But, he informed me, the idea was not original with him: His grandfather had narrated to him a similar anecdote which had taken place in 1794 (or 5) off the Coast of Brittany, which had led to the capture of a British ship landing arms, ammunition and counterfeit money for the Breton royalists who were fighting the Republican Armies.

German ships do get through the British blockade, and it is probable that a suspected ship, such as the *Luisa*, would be used as a decoy. There is the amazing episode of the 1914-18 War, when the German cruisers, *Goeben* and *Breslau*, slipped through a British Squadron to bombard the Algerian Coast and find shelter in Turkey, by the simple expedient of reversing their lights. When one considers what is happening off the Atlantic Coast of the United States, it is easy to understand how the Mauritanian Coast cannot be watched beyond the chance of a single ship sneaking down.

The tartan rig is peculiar to the Mediterranean, but any kind of craft could be bought by Senegalese fishermen. I know that the mail-boat to Port-Etienne would buy fresh fish at sea, in the days of yore. I also know that she was not a sloop, and didn't make sixteen knots!

You can understand why after the above we had very little more to say about "coincidence." Just one final word, however. Anyone who ever saw Mr. Surdez in the flesh—and we mean flesh! (How many hundred pounds is it,

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DAVID LAVENDER is another recruit to the ranks of our Writers' Brigade this month. The author of "Letter of the Law" rises, according to *Camp-Fire* custom, and introduces himself in this wise—

I grew up on a cattle ranch in Colorado. The cattle business was booming when I finished high school so I was sent East to Princeton. Finishing there, I went back to the cattle business which had taken a turn for the bad. Came a day when I wanted to get married and needed a stake and the $5 a day paid to gold miners seemed to offer the quickest solution. As a result, I got a job at the old Camp Bird Mine in the San Juan mountains above Ouray. The mine was six miles up by pack mule from the mill and the mill was above the town; when the snow got 20 feet deep you stayed at the mine. A quarter of an ounce of gold dusted through a ton of quartz in specks too infinitesimal to be seen is enough to be profitable. That means digging quite a bit of rock out of the guts of the mountain in order to make up many bars of gold. I ran the hoist and after a few hours of work both me and the machine were coated with white hoar frost.

During the next summer, I was among a posse deputized to help the sheriff apprehend a western bad man who was run to earth in an abandoned mine cabin. The door was battered down and the desperado was discovered hiding under the bed from which he had to be pulled by great effort.

Came the fall and the prospect of being shut away again for another long winter and I gave up mining, went back to being a cowboy—which meant doling out feed to starving animals when the graze ran out, dragging cows out of bogs in the early spring. It meant pushing the cattle into the mountains as soon as there was grass in the spring and luxurious summers in the state forests

during which the cattle fattened and I indulged my hobbies of trout fishing and mountain climbing. With my brother I made several first ascents of western peaks.

Then I married, went on a cow buying trip in Utah, on which my wife accompanied me and was the first white woman ever to ride through miles of territory where the cowboys live in caves and where a ranch is measured in thousands of square miles.

When this nomadic form of ranch life became too strenuous for her I gave it up and moved over to California and took up writing. My work has appeared in Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Esquire, Harper's Bazaar, Travel, and many other magazines. Doubleday Doran will publish a book of personal narrative next year.

EMMA NORWOOD LAWRENCE whose reverent and stirring "Prayer for Airmen" opens our issue, operates a cotton and tobacco farm near Lumberton, N. C. She writes—

Farming is like drawing to an inside straight—if you hit, you draw the jackpot—if you don't, you go down doubled and redoubled and find yourself sitting on the courthouse steps behind the eighthball waiting for the Sheriff to come and sell you out. (I have tangled up several games here but you know what I mean.) If you have a season that is not too dry, you make a good crop if it doesn't rain too much. Then if it doesn't get so hot that the bolls on the cotton drop off and the tobacco does not get "rim-fired," or if a cool, wet spell does not set in so that the tobacco has a "second growth" and the blue mold does not strike it or the boll weevil does not eat the cotton, why then about once in three years we make enough to pay fertilizer bills and taxes. Should none of these ills befall the farmer, then the prices are usually so low he is in as bad a fix as ever. However, for the sake of accuracy, I must admit that last week I sold eight thousand pounds of tobacco and made an average of forty-three cents. But I feel sure that the prices will now go down and I shall lose more on the next sales than I made on the first. In case I make good on tobacco, the cotton will probably sell below the cost of production. No use being optimistic.

*(Continued on page 125)*

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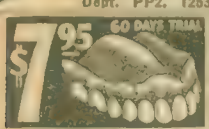


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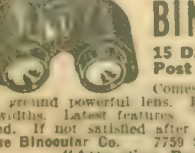

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# LOST TRAILS

NOTE: We offer this department to readers who wish to get in touch again with friends or acquaintances separated by years or chance. Give your own name and full address. Please notify *Adventure* immediately should you establish contact with the person you are seeking. Space permitting, each inquiry addressed to Lost Trails will be run in three consecutive issues. Requests by and for women are declined, as not considered effective in a magazine published for men. *Adventure* also will decline any notice that may not seem a sincere effort to recover an old friendship, or for any other reason in the judgment of the editorial staff. No charge is made for publication of notices.

Chas. Powell (Paul), last heard from in 1924 or '26, supposed to be in or near Monroe, Fla. Write Fred C. Powell, Box 1241, Reno, Nev.

Would like very much to locate my brother, Thomas Merchant Ross, from whom I have not heard since 1926. He left home near Childress, Texas, and was last heard from a few days later in Red Buff, California. In his letter he talked of going to Oregon. He would now be about 31 years old. He had a ruddy complexion, black hair and part of one front tooth missing. Anyone knowing his present whereabouts, please communicate with his brother, Private Allen R. Ross, care **Adventure,** or his sister, Mrs. Alice Ross Archer, 1709 Mentor St., Dallas, Tex.

I would like to locate Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Franklin. Their last known whereabouts was in the Englewood district, close to Halsted St., Chicago, Ill., about ten years ago. They may have journeyed to Ontario—any information will be appreciated by their old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Powell, 203 Buttrey St., Niagara Falls, Ontario, Can.

Would like to get in touch with Dave Kelly Roberts. He was with the New Orleans *Daily States* in 1916-17. I think he went to Jacksonville, Fla. Write Harry Williams, 2029 Main St., Kansas City, Mo.

I would like to get in touch with Buck Rumkin, a young man in his twenties, last heard of in San Francisco, Calif., over two years ago. If this man, or anyone who knows of his whereabouts would write to his old friend on the MJ Ranch, it would be greatly appreciated. Bill Jewell, Foreman MJ Ranch, Buffalo Creek, British Columbia, Can.

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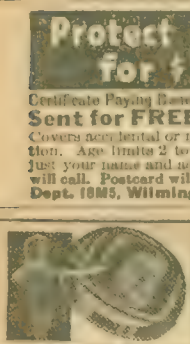

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**December issue on sale November 11th**

*(Continued from page 121)*

During the past few years, I have had a number of poems appear here and there. Nothing startling. I have written two books and several shorts. Mind you, I say *written*, not *sold*. The agent to whom I sent the last book seemed interested. He said it was impressive, and that there was "lots of good in it," nonetheless, he could not get any publisher to see eye to eye with him. He, the literary agent, asked me to make some changes and return it to him. When the tobacco is sold and the cotton gathered and ginned, when the peanuts are gathered and shipped, when the hay is baled and stored, when the hogs are killed and turned into sausages, hams, bacon, lard, etc., and the southern farmer starts in for a winter of starvation, then I think I shall try to re-write my book. P. S. Since writing this, I have learned that the government is going to put a ceiling price on tobacco! What did I tell you!

Lady, what do you mean starvation! Our mouth is watering.

WE HAVEN'T forgotten about that "Old-Timers' Issue" about which we sounded you out a few months ago. It's coming along—tentatively scheduled for February—and while we can't hope to make everybody happy and incorporate all the ideas, suggestions and—yes—even definite instructions that flooded in as soon as we introduced the subject we're betting no one is going to be all mad at what we've cooked up. There'll be more definite news next month but just to whet your appetites with a sample—Tut's coming back! With one of the all-fired funniest cowtown capers we've encountered in years.—K.S.W.


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**Notice:** Many of our *Ask Adventure* experts are now engaged in government service of one kind or another. Some are on active duty in the Army or Navy, others serving in an executive or advisory capacity on various of the boards and offices which have been set up to hasten the nation's war effort. Almost without exception these men have consented to remain on our staff, carry on their work for the magazine if humanly possible, but with the understanding that for the duration such work is of secondary importance to their official duties. This is as it should be, so when you don't receive answers to queries as promptly as you have in the past please be patient. And remember that foreign mails are slow and uncertain these days, many curtailed drastically. Bear with us and we'll continue to try to serve you as speedily as possible.

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**Anthropology:** *American, north of the Panama Canal, customs, dress, architecture; pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

**Aviation:** *airplanes, airships, airways and landing fields, contests, aero clubs, insurance, laws, licenses, operating data, schools, foreign activities, publications, parachutes, gliders* — MAJOR FALK HARMEL, 709 Longfellow St., Washington, D. C.

**Big Game Hunting:** *guides and equipment*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

**Entomology:** *insects and spiders; venomous and disease-carrying insects*—DR. S. W. FROST, 465 E. Foster Ave., State College, Pa.

**Forestry:** *in the United States, national forests of the Rocky Mountain States*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

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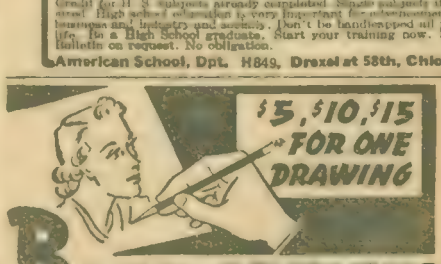


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**★Australia and Tasmania**—ALAN FOLEY, 18a Sandridge St., Bondi, Sydney, Australia.

**★South Sea Islands**—WILLIAM MCCREADIE, "Ingle Nook," 39 Cornelia St., Wiley Park, N. S. W.

**Hawaii**—JOHN SNELL, Deputy Administrator, Defense Savings Staff, 1055 Bishop St., Honolulu, Hawaii.

**Madagascar**—RALPH LINTON, Dept. of Anthropology, Columbia University, New York City.

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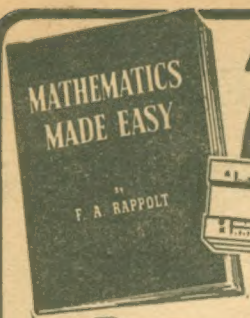


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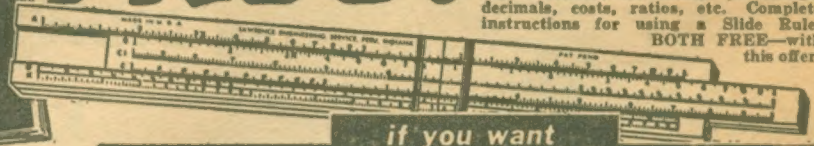

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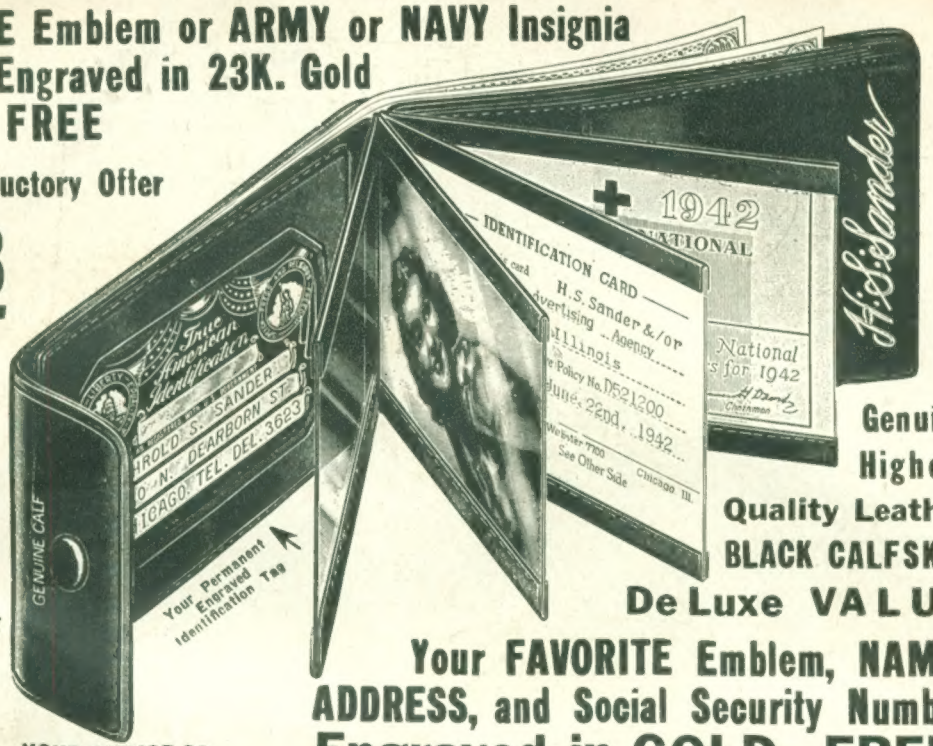


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